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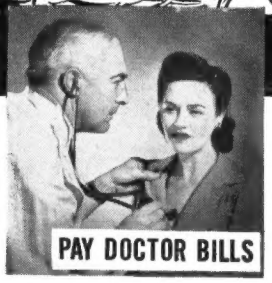

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STAR WESTERN

BIG ROMANCES OF THE WEST

VOLUME 53 FEBRUARY, 1953 NUMBER 1

★ ★ ★ **Thrill-Packed Western Novelettes** ★ ★ ★

LITTLE MAN-HUNTING DEVIL! ..... ***Art Lawson*** **10**
All that stood in the way of Alec Langley's realizing his prison dreams was that reckless she-devil, Sue Logan!

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Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

NEXT ISSUE **OUT JANUARY 28TH!**

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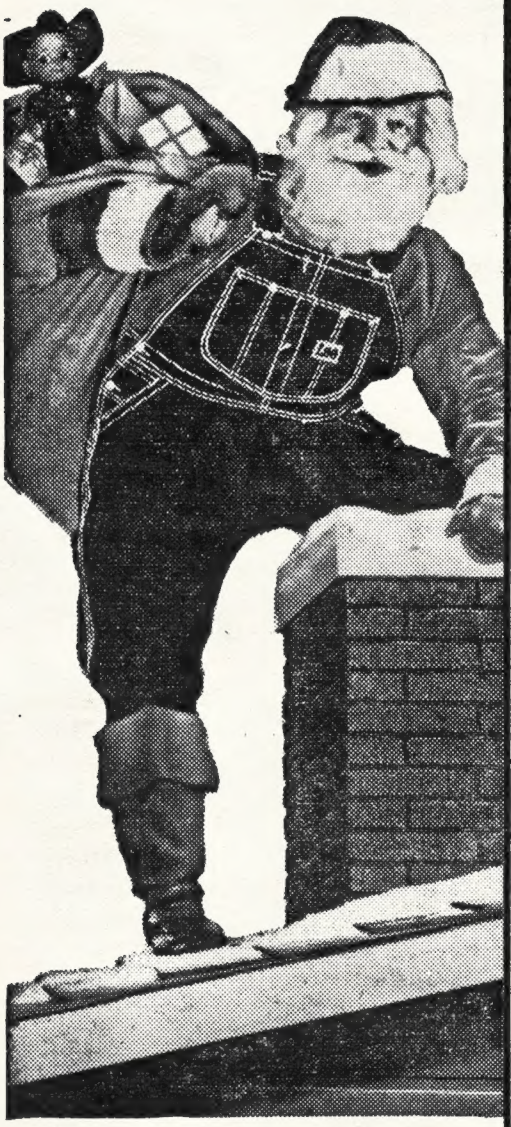

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ACES AND QUEENS

IN THE Spanish-American colonies of the Davis Mountains of Texas, many stories are told of powerful charms or amulets which bring happiness and success in love and marriage. One of these tales, often told when cowboys gather around their evening campfire, is that of the talisman of the golden antlers, and is related here by Pauline Booker. . . .

Long ago, the legend goes, a wise old Indian Medicine Man carved out the tiny golden deer-antlers and inscribed on the charm some mystic symbols. The golden antlers, it is said, were endowed with the power of giving to their possessor his heart's desire in romance; and the owner would live happily ever after with his beloved.

When a pretty little Spanish girl named Consuela heard the legend of the golden antlers, she smiled slyly to herself and straightway thought of how she might put the legend to use.

For Consuela had two ardent, importunate suitors—slender, dashing, lighthearted Ramon and stocky, thoughtful Miguel. Ramon was gay and thrilling, but Miguel, she knew, would always be the more practical and successful of the two.

Consuela simply couldn't choose between them. But when she heard the story of the golden antlers, she decided to put her suitors to a test. She would send them on a search for the fabled love charm; surely, then, she would learn which man would be her lucky choice. . . .

So she told Ramon and Miguel the legend of the golden antlers; then she added: "The charm is said to still be hereabouts in the mountains. The one who finds it and brings it to me is the one I shall take as my husband."

Ramon assured her gaily and gallantly that he would never rest till he had brought the charm to her on bended knee. Miguel merely looked more serious and thoughtful than usual. But both young men promptly started their search for the golden antlers. . . .

It was the practical Miguel who first located the charm in the cabin of an ancient Indian woman far up in the rugged hills. It wasn't easy to persuade the old woman to part with it; but in exchange for a substantial number of goats, Miguel one day rode away from the cabin with the golden talisman in his pocket.

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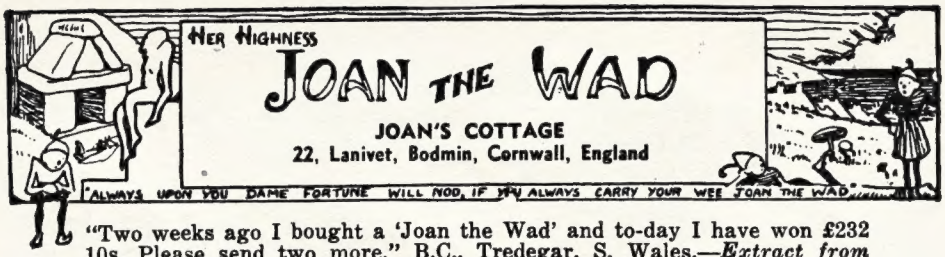
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RED-HEADED RIO QUEEN

By Pauline Booker

Together, they built the greatest empire the Southwest ever saw. . . .

IN THE early 1860's great civil strife and confusion raged below the Rio Grande. The Mexican liberal, Juarez, had overthrown the aristocracy and forced many of the former Mexican leaders into exile.

The government of Juarez, however, was so shaky and uncertain that Louis Napoleon, Emperor of France, who greatly desired a foothold in the new world, decided the time was ripe for him to step into Mexican politics.

In 1863, Napoleon sent troops into Mexico against the forces of Juarez. In fierce fighting they soon succeeded in ousting the liberal leader. Under the sponsorship of Napoleon, the crown of Mexico was given to Maximilian, a young Prince of Austria.

Emperor, by virtue of Napoleon, Maximilian landed at Vera Cruz on May 28, 1864, bringing with him his green-eyed, auburn-haired bride, Charlotte of Belgium, who had adopted the Spanish version of her name Carlotta.

Carlotta had met Max, as he was familiarly called, when he was the ideal beau of all the courts of Europe. As the daughter of King Leopold of Belgium, Carlotta had been raised a princess and had met many brave, handsome and thrilling courtiers; but it was not until Max, of the golden hair and the deep blue eyes, came along that she lost her heart. "My Treasure," she called him after their marriage. He was always the object of her steadfast love and devotion.

Max was a dreamy, sensitive young man with the soul of an idealist. Carlotta, who was practical as well as beautiful, gave him new force and ambition. When he became Emperor of Mexico, she dedicated herself with all her being to helping him bring peace and prosperity to the land.

For this was the vision that Max and Carlotta brought hopefully to Mexico City in the spring of 1864. Carlotta would establish schools and hospitals and do all she could to better the conditions of the needy peons; Max would try his utmost to reconcile the political factions of the country.

They settled down happily in an old castle called Chapultepec, near Mexico City. The castle was surrounded by colorful gardens and great parks with trees filled with many varieties of singing birds. In this tropical paradise, Carlotta felt as if she were living in a wondrous fairy tale.

But after a time, things began to go badly. The Civil War ended in the United States, and Louis Napoleon began to fear that country would then turn its own eyes towards Mexico. Having no desire for any conflict with the United States, Napoleon forestalled that possibility by withdrawing his troops from Mexico. And with the

(Continued on page 110)

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By
Art
Lawson

"I've got this shotgun loaded with old nails," she said.

Little Man-Hunting Devil!

All Alec Langley's prison dreams were centered on the spread he'd someday build. All that now stood in the way was that gorgeous reckless, golden-haired she-devil, Sue Logan.

WHEN Alec Langley signed the final papers on the Turkey Track, he felt pretty good. He didn't own the spread. He was just leasing it from the bank, and he was going to work on shares cattle that the bank owned. Alec knew how to handle cows, and he knew that he would make out okay—barring a disaster. The time would come when Alec would own this rich meadow known as Antelope Park. He'd own all the cattle he could see from the knoll where he had decided to build his

house. He'd have a wife and some kids. He'd be a respectable man. But before he moved in he figured on telling his nearest neighbor that he was a jailbird. It was something that would come out sooner or later. It might as well be admitted now.

He rode up to Jake Logan's Bull's-Eye spread feeling like a kid going to the principal's office because he had put a snake in a girl's desk. When he arrived at the place, he wondered if he was doing right. He had known that Jake Logan's outfit was the biggest in this corner of the state. But he hadn't expected the endless corrals, or the great white house with columns across the front like one of those old southern mansions. A colored boy came out to take his horse.

"Mister Logan expecting you, sir," the boy said.

Alec wondered how that could be. He hadn't told anyone that he was coming here. But he said, "Thanks," to the boy and hesitated a moment before climbing the steps to the big house. Alec was a good six feet, slim, and he swung his wide shoulders as he walked, like a sailor ashore. He looked straight ahead with level, gray eyes. Then he went up the steps.

A girl stood at the door smiling softly at him.

"You must be our new neighbor," she said.

She had a breathless way of talking. Her voice was a caress. Golden hair hung in long waves to her bare shoulders. Alec had heard of women dressing that way, and he had seen pictures of them in the magazines. But this was the first time he had ever actually seen one, not counting the light ladies in the honkatonks. Alec was embarrassed. He blushed as he took off his hat. The girl's shoulders were naked, and only the tiniest of sleeves circled her arms up high like bracelets. She was a shapely girl. Alec felt like a damned fool.

"Alec Langley," he said. "I'm taking over the Turkey Track." He cleared his throat and tried to shake this girl's contours from his mind. "I'm looking for Jake Logan. I want to say hello."

"He's here," she said. Dark lashes over lupine-blue eyes and a provocative movement of her hips shook Alec. Out on the range night herding, a man dreams a lot of girls. In jail, too, girls kind of edge into a man's brain, but then you meet one like this girl and you know that those highly-colored dreams are only a pale imitation of the real thing. "I'm Sue," the girl added. "Jake's my father. He'll be glad to see you. Come on in."

He followed her. A fist seemed to clutch his throat. Gleaming shoulders, swaying hips, the long skirt swishing about her ankles and satin shoes, tore at Alec. God, how he wanted to touch her!

She led him into a wide hall. A great chandelier glistened and tinkled above his head. A winding staircase led him to the second floor. Down at the end of the hall she stopped before a white-painted door on which someone had burned the Bull's-Eye brand. The paint was badly blistered. Below, a running iron had been used to letter: KEEP OUT.

"Father's doings" the girl explained. "He don't like this house. I mean, he doesn't like it."

She slanted him another smile that stopped his breath. Now he wished he had stayed away. Sometime during the passage down the hall, the girl had taken his hand. She held it softly. Her hip brushed his, lightly.

"When you're through with Father," she said, "I'll have tea for you on the terrace. Don't let him scare you."

The old man would have to be a genuine terror if he could frighten him more than his daughter had. She knocked.

"What the devil do you want now!"

The blast rattled the door.

"Mr. Langley's here to see you," the girl said, not disturbed by her father's roar.

"Then let him in, damn it!" The door rattled again.

The girl let go of Alec's hand and opened the door. His fingers tingled queerly. He knew that he was blushing. And he felt like the biggest damn fool in the world.

When he just stood there frozen and unable to move, the girl patted him on the arm.

"Pop won't bite you," she said, and shoved him through the doorway.

JAKE LOGAN'S office looked like a beat-up room out of an old log cabin. The walls were of chinked logs; the fireplace was stone, not too well put together, as if Jake had constructed it himself. There was a built-in bunk in one corner and a roll-top desk next to a window. A round-wicked Rochester lamp hung from the cross beam; and the ceiling, if you could call it that, looked as if it were the roof of a log cabin, too. The floor was puncheon spread with a buffalo hide and a bear skin.

"I suppose you think I'm crazy, too!" Jake Logan roared.

Jake was a litle bandy-legged guy, with a walrus mustache, no hair, a long nose, and eyes that looked right through a man. Jake wore an old, sun-faded shirt, patched levis and beat-up boots. He certainly did not look like the richest man in seven counties.

"I wouldn't say that," Alec finally got out. "But you have to admit it's mighty surprising to walk into this layout after going through the rest of the house."

The old man laughed. "I get a big kick out of it, boy," he said. Then his hard eyes turned soft. "I built this cabin with my own hands, boy. Every damn log in it. I built that fireplace. I hauled pines down from the mountain and spilt them for the floor." He stopped talking. A queer hobby, Alec thought. The old man was nuts, after all. "Me and my woman slept in that bunk," he told Alec. "Sue was born there. Snow ten feet deep. I had to do the job. Like a cow dropping a calf, only different, damn it, because she's your woman." There were tears in the old man's eyes. "Let's have a drink."

He opened a little trap door in the floor and fished out an earthenware jug. It gurgled pleasantly. He poured a couple of good-sized drinks in tin cups like those used on a chuckwagon. He handed one to Alec.

"Them was the days!" he said, his eyes still glistening.

They clicked their cups. Alec was slow to realize that Jake Logan was waiting for him to make a toast.

"Spent some time in Mexico, once," Alec said. "On a hacienda, breaking horses. Here's what they say, Mr. Logan—"

"Jake to you," the old man snapped, "and hurry up. My tongue's hanging out so far I'd trip over it if anybody pushed me."

Alec clicked cups again.

Then he quickly rattled off a toast in Spanish.

They swallowed their whiskey. The old man grinned.

"Okay? What's she mean?"

"A lot of money," Alec translated, "and a lot of love with the dark-eyed girls."

Jake Logan laughed. He poured two more drinks. He was brooding again.

"When that girl built the big house, she wanted to burn this down," he said to Alec, his voice so low it was almost a whisper. "Shack, she calls it. But I built this house and brought my bride to it. So, damn it, boy, I made her and that fancy architect build that other house right around it. It took some raring, tearing and hollering, boy. But I still got this place. Look."

He opened a battened door. There was a yard enclosed in a hedge of jackpine to completely shut it off from any outside view.

"I kept that, too," Jake said.

Alec grinned. Out here in the yard he could see that the cabin was old and weatherbeaten, and that the big, white house did

in fact partially surround it. From the ranchyard, one would never see it.

"To the ladies," Jake said suddenly. "Let's drink to them!"

They turned up their cups. For the first time in years, Alec felt as if he was with somebody he could understand. He didn't think the old man was crazy at all. Jake stared at him, his eyes hard again.

"You had something on your mind when you come to see me?" he asked. "Or did you just drop around for a free drink or two?"

Might as well tell him right now, Alec thought, even if it did break up this very pleasant interlude. He banged the bottom of the tin cup aaginst the knuckles of his lef hand.

"I spent two years in jail for rustling," he said. "Huntsville. I wasn't in Mexico on a joy ride. I was running from the law. I came back, and they caught up with me."

"Hell, boy," the old man said. "We know all about that. I'm sort of ex-chairman of the board of the bank. We looked you up. We took the chance."

Then he laughed. "Look, right where you're standing. Used to be a corral there. First cow in it was a stray. Had a sort of Circle C kind of marking on it. That's where I got the idea of the Bull's-Eye. Hell, how do you think I got started?"

"Didn't know," Alec admitted. "But I don't figure on trying to start out that way again."

The old man shook his head. "Times have changed," he said slowly. "Old days nobody minded too much if a young feller picked up a few cows here and a few there —if he was smart enough not to get caught at it. Let's have another drink."

THE colored boy was waiting for Alec in the hall. He led him across a tremendous parlor and through some wide French doors to a terrace paved with bricks set in an odd design. Wrought iron chairs were placed strategically. There were carved stone benches at the ends of the terrace and all sorts of bushes and flowers that Alec did not recognize. It was overwhelming to the cowboy whose idea of a flower garden was a couple of geraniums in tin cans. He didn't even notice the breathtaking view, because to him it was only mountains, and there were plenty of those around for everybody in this neck of the woods.

Sue Logan swished up to him. She had changed her dress for one that seemed even more sparse above the waist than the one in which she had first appeared. Sue was a beautiful girl with bountiful curves and a slim waist that begged for a man's arms. She set a man's pulse to acting strangely. Taking his hand, she led him over to an iron bench, just big enough for two. She sat down, spread her dress and pulled him down to her. They were so close he could feel her warmth even before she moved closer. She hooked her arm in his and looked up at him with parted lips.

"Nobody'll bother us here," she said. "The men never come here, and the servants stay away until they're called."

He didn't understand why she was telling him this. A servant girl brought tea, toast, and a covered pitcher that contained rum instead of hot water. The maid went away silently, and Sue leaned forward to pour the tea. In doing so she brushed against him. She didn't seem to notice.

"Rum?" she asked, turning to smile up at him.

"Sure," he said.

She loaded her cup with it, too, then sat back even closer to him.

"Guess you got along all right with father. At least I didn't hear any bellowing. I'm glad of that because it means you'll stay around a while."

"I'm staying up there from now on out, I reckon," he said with determination.

She brushed back her golden hair, then twisted about suddenly to face him. Her knees pressed hard against him. She lifted her hand to touch his cheek, and then her

blue eyes were heavy-lidded one moment, big and round the next. She began to move her fingers across his jaw. Alec Langley had never known such indecision before. He had been pleased that he had gotten along so well with old Jake Logan; pleased that Jake had passed off his jail sentence so lightly. The bank, Jake, everybody had been so helpful to a man with a past. And yet, he could ruin everything in a moment with this girl.

But the hand that had been on his cheek was in his hair now, holding him, tugging at him. Her full, red lips had parted. Bare shoulders glistened and her bosom was suddenly tumultuous while her fingers twitched in the crisp, short curls of his dark head. He stiffened his backbone to fight her off.

Then he changed his mind and bent forward when something dropped near the French doors. "Darn!"

Sue Logan jerked away. She was furious. Alec had never seen anyone quite as angry. She was ready to kill. Alex sidled away from her and glanced around. On the terrace, near the doors, a girl had bent down to pick up a book. She held other books cradled in her arm. Alec saw nothing but a cascade of black hair flooding over her face as she bent down. When she straightened, she flung her mane back with a twist of her head and smiled widely.

"The school ma'rm, damn her!" Sue hissed in Alex's ear. Then Sue smiled and honeyed her voice. "Come on over, Jessie, and meet our new neighbor. Jessie LaDoux, Alec Langley. Alec's going to open up the Turkey Track."

Alec hopped to his feet. The school teacher's handshake was good. Her level eyes were so dark he did not realize at once that they were a purple blue. And later, when he was alone, and the picture of Sue's bare shoulders and inviting lips came up to plague him, he couldn't remember anything at all about the school teacher except that she had a hand and a face, suspended in mid air.

CHAPTER TWO

The Mountain Lion

JAKE LOGAN loaned Alec a couple of cowboys to help him drift his herd up to Antelope Park. After they went back down to the Bull's-Eye, Alec was on his own. He turned a couple of little pigs loose where the hickory trees grew on a south slope of East Mountain, built a roost for some chickens, and freed a dozen pekin ducks on Mirror Pond. He set up a behive and plowed a garden. Alec had it figured out that if he raised most of his food he could get to own the ranch quicker. He wouldn't even kill a steer for beef. There were antelope and white-tails still left on the mountain sides. The pond and streams were full of fish. A man with muscles and ambition didn't need money: *Hard work, son,* Alec told himself, *will get you everything you need.*

And some of what he wanted he could get without work. Apple trees in the orchard were heavy with blossom. Sue Logan's eyes were languid with promise. Alec reckoned on calling on her the first Saturday evening, after he got his herd established on the belly-deep grass of the park. Friday night he washed clothes for Saturday night. Saturday he worked from dawn to dusk digging post holes for his corral and setting cedar posts he had hauled down from the mountain side. It was work for machinery, not for a man, and it seemed endless. After a quick supper of jerked beef and biscuits buttered with hot bacon grease, Alec got out his shaving tools.

His beard was black and curly. It took a lot of lather. The warm water soothed him, the crackling fire before the tent in which he slept was hypnotic. Alec didn't know he had gone to sleep until it was too late to do anything about his trip to the Bull's Eye. He awoke crouched over and stiff, his face feeling peculiar with the dried lather still on his chin and cheeks. The fire was only a blinking, red coal.

Alec cussed a little. He washed his face

and crawled into the tent. He fell flat on his face, sound asleep again.

The sun awakened him. Rolling out of the blankets, he sat for a moment on a rock in front of the tent. When he finally got himself organized, he built a fire and fetched a pail of water to hang by a pothook from the tripod over the blaze. He tossed a handful of corn to the chickens to keep them around. For the rest of their food, he'd let them forage for bugs and seeds. He milked his cow and began to grin. Life was good, even if it was hard work. Today was Sunday, and he'd go to church. Might do his soul good. Besides, he'd meet the valley folk. He shaved carefully, then stripped and ran down to the pond for a bath. The ducks scurried in all directions squawking. The ice-cold water toned up his tired muscles. Kicking his feet hard to raise a spray, he coasted around on his belly.

Then he climbed out, rubbed himself dry with the towel, and was about to run for his tent when he noticed a saddled horse near the corral.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Who's there?"

No one answered. He wondered if the horse could have wandered in. With the towel around his middle, he walked warily toward the tent. There was no one in sight anywhere.

"Funny," he said aloud.

The girl hopped out of the tent where she had been hiding.

"Boo!"

Alec's ears were hot. The girl laughed as if she would strangle.

"Funny's the word, all right." She howled. Her black hair veiled one side of her face. Embarrassed as he was, Alec saw that the schoolteacher consisted of plenty more than a face and a hand. She was dressed in a faded old red shirt open very low at the throat, and levis that were tailored to fit her long legs sleekly. When she laughed, she lighted up all over. She flung her hair back. "What were you pretending to be down there?" she asked, looking frankly at him with eyes that knew how to admire a man's physique. "A steamboat?"

"A sternwheeler," he admitted, feeling like an idiot. "How'd you guess?"

"There are lots of little boys in my classes," she told him seriously. Her glance moved from his eyes down over his broad chest to narrow belly, past the towel to his toes, and back up again jerkily. "But none quite as big as you," she said.

He could feel the redness seeping over him. "If you don't mind dismissing school, Miss, maybe I can get my pants on," he suggested.

She laughed at him again and stepped aside. Alec dove for his tent. He broke the championship records getting into his clean outfit. He slicked down his hair, stamped into boots he had polished yesterday, and felt a lot better. The girl had cooked coffee. He saucered it to cool it. She stared at him intently. His face began to heat up again when he remembered how she had studied him when he was almost naked.

"You remind me of the old lighthouse back home," she told him with a straight face. "Tall and sturdy—kind of weather-beaten—built to last." The flattery was getting him. A smile tugged at the corner of his lips. "And flashing alternately red and white," she added with a laugh. "Do you always act like that when a girl's around?"

She smiled fondly at him.

"Only when a girl catches me stark naked playing I'm a steamboat," he said. He tipped up the saucer. The coffee was good. "And that ain't every day—or every girl."

"I didn't know men came like you any more," she sighed. "Well . . ." She stood up and absently tucked her shirtail into her levis. The beat-up shirt danced forward in an interesting fashion when she straightened her back. She had suddenly become very sober. "There were a couple of men looking for you in the valley," she said. "They were inquiring at school—asking

the children if they knew and had seen you."

Alec almost glanced over his shoulder. He had thought that the two years in the wagonwheel works at Huntsville had cured him of feeling haunted. Now he was right back where he had been when he fled into Mexico. He was not wanted for anything now. He laughed nervously.

"What of it?" he asked. "Any reason why a man's friends can't look him up?"

"No!" she said. "But I thought you ought to know. They've been hanging around the Frontier Saloon. The sheriff checked on them. They were at Huntsville when you were there."

Alec suddenly felt very cold. He poured himself another cup of coffee.

"I'm sorry," the girl said in a whisper. "But I thought I had better tell you."

He stared broodingly at the fire. Then he shrugged. "Thanks," he said. "You know, when I woke up this morning I thought, being a new citizen in this country, I might ride down to church and listen to the sermon. I ain't been in a church for a long time—only the chapel at the pen. Now, what do you think?"

"Why," she cried, "I think it's wonderful. I'll go with you."

THE service was half over when Alec Langley and Jessie La Doux eased into one of the rear pews. She had had to stop off at the Bull's-Eye, where she was being boarded during the school year, to get a dress. When they came into the church they might have been any young couple down from their ranch, he in his clean levis, she in a very modest dress and a small bonnet. But they had not been seated half a minute before everyone there knew that they had arrived. It was as if the members of the congregation had eyes in the backs of their heads. Jake Logan was down front with his gorgeous daughter. Behind them sat Henry Rotherman of the bank who had already worked his way up to cashier. There were others Alec knew, but he had not become acquainted with most of them.

The preacher got himself wound up and began to shout. Alec realized that the parson was talking about him, without actually mentioning his name. The gist was that a repentant sinner should no longer have his sins held against him. At the same time, the preacher shouted, a man is known by the company he keeps. Alec got the point quick enough. The preacher, and probably everyone else in the neighborhood, had heard of his "friends" from Huntsville. It was a warning.

The last prayer was prayed. The last hymn was sung. Alec tried to escape but was blocked by the school teacher. Then he lost her and somehow was cornered by Sue Logan. The blonde girl wore a high-necked shirtwaist today covered by a tiny jacket. The long, dark skirt swept low. Politely, she introduced him around. He shook hands and bowed.

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am. Howdy, sir."

Unlike Jake Logan they had not accepted him yet. They watched him with calculating eyes while they told him how glad they were to have him taking over the Turkey Track. The younger women and girls glanced back at him a second time, while the older ones eyed the younger ones and wondered if they'd be safe with such a man around. Alec was mighty relieved when he finally broke away from them. Helping Sue into the surrey, he looked around for Jessie La Doux.

"Oh, she went home with father," Sue said lightly. "Henry Rotherman's coming out for dinner. He always does. Where's your horse?"

"At the Bull's-Eye," Alex said. "I came down with Jessie."

"Then what are you waiting for? Want a lift?"

He climbed aboard and took the reins. The four chestnuts were perfectly matched teams and were for show rather than necessity.

When he lifted the reins, a movement under the awning before the Cassidy Brothers General Store briefly caught Alec's attention. Then he stared back, suddenly hard.

A rather chunky young man was sitting on the rickety bench staring hopelessly and morosely at Sue Logan. Beside him was a wizened old man who clasped his hands over his head in the ancient gesture of congratulations. His grin was as wide and as pleasant as a witch's scowl. Alec shook out the reins. The horses started off at a trot, picked up fast, rattled across the bridge over Slaughter Creek, and headed for the upper end of the valley.

Sue let herself be jolted up against him. But Alec was hardly aware of her. He couldn't have run into worse luck than to have the Professor looking for him sided by muscle-bound Speed Swift. The sharpest mind in Huntsville and the quickest killer. Alec would never forget the Professor working out his endless chess problems or Speed Swift practicing drawing an imaginary six-shooter, two at a time, cross-handed, straight forward, shoulder holster, all the various draws both trick and practical. Alec shuddered.

The girl had grabbed his arm. She was alarmed.

"What's the matter?"

He tried to pass it ozff. "Nothing," he said. "I been working kind of hard. I guess I'm asleep on my feet."

"I know that school ma'rm rode out your way this morning and brought you to church," Sue said. "You're not—"

"I was coming to church anyway," he said. "She and I just had some coffee together."

Sue's smile became melting again. "We don't have to hurry home," she said. "Let's stop down by the creek a bit to cool off. It's nice down there this time of the year. We can take a little walk."

That was exactly what Alec did not want to do. But Sue's hand was on his, reining the horses over. She was surprisingly strong.

ONCE, during an attack of sheer bravado, Alec had lassoed a mountain lion that some dogs had chased up a tree. It was a mistake. He couldn't hang onto that lion or let go of it. The horse took to the open road with the big cat bounding along at the end of the rope and the dogs baying behind. Any one of the other men in the hunt could have shot the lion, but they only stood around laughing. It was luck rather than anything else that bailed Alec out of that fix. The horse plunged into a ford across a stream. The swift current swung the lion downstream, and Alec finally got in a shot with his Colt. Alec had never lived down that exploit.

But Alec knew that he was in a worse fix now. He couldn't let go of Sue Logan or hang onto her. She led him down to the creek where the willows shed their feathery shadow. Taking off her bonnet she shook out her golden hair and smiled up at Alec in that soft, inviting way. She slipped out of the little jacket.

"It's nice down here," she said.

Alec didn't say anything. As was her habit with him, she stood very close. Now she clung to his arm. It was mighty pleasant down here where the creek water ran deep and slow beneath sheer river banks. A small, greenish kingfisher hunted upstream. Somewhere in the willows a catbird alternated between mewing and scolding.

"Father likes you," Sue said suddenly.

Alec was flustered. "He's a great old guy."

She clung tighter. "Henry Rotherman wants to marry me," she said.

"Why not?" Alec suggested. "Henry's a nice fellow."

A tiny frown creased the girl's smooth forehead. Her lips seemed more full than he remembered, and the color of her eyes deepened

"Father says Henry's an account book—not a man," she said. "Father says you're a man." She stamped her foot, not very hard. "But I sometimes wonder whether you are or not."

She flung herself around so she was right in front of him, her head thrown back so her silky hair fell free. He was strangling. The memory of that mountain lion was bright in his mind now, and the knowledge that this girl was a lot of woman. Angry, she moved closer to him.

"Aren't you going to kiss me?" she asked, her voice sharp.

He cleared his throat. It was as rough as if he had been eating broken glass.

"Well," he stammered, "I didn't exactly have it in mind."

The girl's eyes grew round with astonishment. Her mouth quivered. She began to shake all over as if she had been caught in an earthquake. Nothing so completely unbelievable as this had ever happened to Sue Logan before—nothing so horrible. She shoved herself away from him and beat him on the chest with clenched, hard little hands.

"You . . . you . . . you imitation man!" she cried. "You jailbird!"

Tears sprang into her eyes. She ducked suddenly and ran, while Alec looked after her helplessly. It had been a long, long time since he had been with a woman. . . . The catbird scolded him. It woke him up, and he ran after Sue.

As he broke through the willows, he heard Sue shouting to the horses. The crack of the whip was loud, clear. Wagon wheels rattled. He saw her there for a moment standing up, lashing at the horses, her hair flying in the wind. She was gorgeous in her fury—more beautiful now than Alec had ever seen her.

Sue had left Alec, but Alec knew that he still had this female cougar by the tail. There would be no handy river ford to sweep Sue downstream and save him from her claws.

CHAPTER THREE

Sunday Dinner

ALEC was walking up the road when Henry Rotherman came by on his one-horse buckboard. Henry, not yet thirty, was younger than he looked, but long hours at the bank had given him a sort of agelessness, and his balding head and spectacles made him seem at least five years older than he was.

"Get thrown?" Henry asked politely. "Lose your horse? Want a lift?"

"I got thrown, all right," Alec said grimly. "Thanks for the ride."

Alec swung up onto the seat. Henry clucked at the horse, a mild old plug that trotted off slowly. Henry shook his head.

"Never did trust horses," he said. "Stupidest beast alive. One of these days those horseless carriages they're making in Michigan will come down in price. Then, by George, I'll get me one."

"They're just toys for rich men," Alec said. "Are you rich, Henry?"

"I'm going to be," Henry said. He wasn't boasting. He was just stating what he knew would be a fact. He had hunched his shoulders forward and was scowling at the horse's tail. He glanced around at Alec, his eyes set in a calculating banker's manner. "A couple of old friends of yours came to the bank the other day to inquire about you," Henry said. "I don't need to add that the bank is keeping an eye on you. Alec."

"The bank," Alec said, looking right straight at the cashier, "better keep an eye on my *friends.*" He snarled the last word. "How long have they been around, Henry?"

"Three or four days," Henry said. Then his banker's face dissolved. "You haven't seen them?"

"I saw them this morning after church," Alec said. "But I haven't talked to them." His lips were set, hard. What could a man

like Henry Rotherman really know about a man who had spent a stretch in prison? How could this cage-bound banker understand what walls, bars, being endlessly herded around could do to a man who had lived all his life in the open? "I nearly killed that Speed Swift once, Henry. We had a fight. In the wagon shop. He threw a sledge hammer at me. I shoved him into the forge. He burnt himself so bad he couldn't sit down for three months. I haven't seen him since—until today."

Henry stared at Alec, fascinated that he knew a man of such primitive violence. Alec couldn't help pouring it on a little.

"I gave the bellows a pull while he was settin' there," Alec added. "You should of heard him holler. You ever smell a man broiling over a blacksmith's forge, Henry?"

Henry's eyes rolled. His pale face had taken on a greenish cast. He licked his lips.

"Can't say as I have."

"And his pardner," Alec went on, "used to work out chess problems all the time. He said chess wasn't a game, but was life. It's like robbing a bank, he used to say. If you expect to win, you have to figure out your adversary and all of his movements as well as your own."

"I can see that," Henry said in a gasp.

"This Speed Swift had the same idea, only simpler," Alec went on. "He used to say a dead man can't testify against you."

"Of course," Henry said.

"Maybe the bank has its eye on me, Henry," Alec said. "But my *friends,* as you call them, have their eyes on you. And I'm sure Speed Swift ain't ever forgot the day he broiled on the coals. They have their eyes on both of us."

"I don't feel very well," Henry said. "Do you mind taking the reins?"

"Don't mind at all," Alec said.

* * *

Sunday dinner at the Bull's-Eye was not a social success. Sue Logan sulked in one of those distracting, bare-topped dresses she liked to wear. Henry discussed the fine state of grass in the valley, the high price of beef, the effect of peace now that the war with Spain was over, and the dire dangers to the Republican Party if that Teddy Roosevelt got any more power.

"There's talk of putting him up for President," Henry said. "But he'll never make it."

"He's a cattleman," Jake snorted. "He'll get there."

"He's a radical," Henry said.

The school teacher joined the conversation casually. Jake Logan declared the country was going to hell because too many people had adding-machine minds. Henry looked unhappy. Everybody carefully ignored the subject of Alec's two friends.

Afterwards Jake ordered the two men into his office. It was strange, Alec thought, as he stood in the old log cabin, how that homely interior seemed to move them back in time, far back to the Indian Wars. He'd been only a tiny child when Custer was licked. Jake Logan had been starting to build this great ranch then. Yet Alec felt more of a contemporary of Jake than he did of Henry Rotherman, who was about his own age. Henry was nervous in Jake's office. The old man lifted the trap door and extracted the jug. He slopped a good, stiff drink into each of three battered tin cups.

Mucho pesetas . . . he recited Alec's toast.

Alec clicked his cup against Jake's. Henry was puzzled. He didn't understand this toast. Jake's hard eyes were suddenly on the banker.

"You rode out with Alec, Henry," he said. "Did you tell him your newest plans?"

The cashier was flustered. "I thought . . . well . . . we—"

"You thought well we!" Jake shouted at him. "What the hell kind of lingo is that?" Then he grinned at Alec. "The bank's got a lot of money tied up in those cows you're running, Alec," he said. "Hen-

ry kind of thought, now that your playmates have shown up, that maybe we ought to copper our bets somehow. Make a tally to see that you ain't slipping any steers up through Killer Pass over the old Wild Bunch trail. What do you think, Alec?"

"It might be a good idea at that," Alec said. "I'm wild and woolly, Jake. I'm full of fleas. I'm mighty mean. I didn't learn anything in jail." He slid his glance over to Henry. "Who pays the wages of this hombre? Who's going to watch me, Henry? Who feeds him? The bank—or me?"

"It was just an idea," Henry said. "I only meant to check now and then. You've got a record, remember. And now these men—"

"I wrote to them to come up, and they came and asked everyone in town where in hell I was," Alec said. He was angry now, clean through.. "You know why I did that? So everyone in town would start to suspect me. That's why, Henry. So you'd send a man up to watch me. So your man would catch me running cattle through the pass. So I'd get another stretch in prison. I just love the pen, Henry."

HENRY had become sullen. He looked as if he had been taken in with a counterfeit three dollar bill.

"All right," he said. "Let's forget it."

Old Jake Logan winked at Alec. "Henry's a good boy," he said. "Every day he sees all that money at the bank. He handles it. He knows somebody might steal it. Henry watches it real close, Alec. When he looks at a cow, he don't see a cow. He sees money the cow will bring. When he looks at Sue, he don't see a beautiful young woman. He sees a dead old man. He sees money again."

"Now, Mr. Logan," Henry sputtered, "I love your daughter. I'd love her just as much if she was the chore woman in the poor house."

"Just as much, maybe, but different," Jake said. "Now get out of here, Henry, and let a couple of old cattlemen confab."

Henry left in a rush. Jake poured a second drink.

"What happened to you and Sue?" the old man asked. "She fixed it with me to bring home Jessie so she could bring you. But you showed up with Henry."

Alec turned red. "I came half way with her," he said. "I reckon I don't know much about women. I think she wanted to be kissed, but it didn't occur to me at the time, and—"

He had to stop talking because old Jake was howling so loud and beating himself on the knee.

"God! I never heard the like of it in my life," he sputtered. "It didn't occur to you to kiss her. God!"

"I'll know better next time," Alec promised.

The old man suddenly sobered. Tears were running down his cheeks. He closed his hand around Alec's arm.

"I'm trusting you, boy," he said, choking. "Now get on outside with the ladies. Sunday evenings were made special for young fellers and girls. Get on out and don't worry about Henry—or anybody. You've got a job to do."

Alec got on out, but he worried plenty. He couldn't figure out what Speed Swift and the Professor had in mind. He found Henry and the two girls below the terrace on a smoothly mowed piece of lawn fiddling with some mallets and balls and wire hoops. This was a game like polo. No horses, though, and you played it on foot. It was called croquet.

Somehow Alec got teamed up with the school teacher. She showed him how to play the game and after that he really went to town. Like shooting pool, he thought, except that you whanged the ball with the mallet instead of poking it with a cue.

The banker was out to win and did. Sue was not playing so well. Afterwards they had tea laced with rum on the terrace. Alec

lay flat on his back on the bricks that had been warmed by the afternoon's sun. Jessie lolled on one of the stone benches while Sue and Henry sat stiffly in iron chairs.

Henry was annoyed because he had studied the game of croquet for many years and had only squeaked out a victory over Alec, who had never heard of it before. Alec didn't listen. To him the click of the ball on mallet meant nothing. The girls leaning down, moving, walking, stretching, calculating their shots were everything. They were a game, too, like the Professor's chess—a game, but life as well. This banging balls around on grass where cows should be grazing was all foolishness.

Alec sat up suddenly. "I'm going back to the ranch," he said. "I've got work to do."

Henry approved. Sue stuck out her lower lip. She had warmed up a little to Alec during the croquet game, but she was still angry with him for not kissing her down at the creek.

"You'll come next Sunday," she said. "It's nice for Jessie to have a man to play croquet with, too."

She was trying to get at him, but he only smiled.

"And it's nice to play with Jessie," he said.

The school teacher jumped up. "If that's so," she said to Alec, "I'll ride along with you a bit. Okay? Up to the ford, maybe. I can easily get back before dark."

That had been aimed at Sue, not at Alec or Henry.

Alec said: "I'd like it."

They saddled the horse she had ridden up to his place that morning. As soon as they were out of sight of the great white ranchhouse, the girl shifted from side saddle to astride.

"I feel better this way," she said frankly.

She looked better, too, with her long, lovely legs gleaming and her skirt snapping in the breeze. She might not burn a man up as Sue could, but there was something reassuring and warm about her. At the ford they stopped to let their horses drink. Her gentian eyes looked straight at him.

"You only said that back there—that it was nice to play with me—because you wanted to get back at Sue for something," she said. "You two had a fight coming back from church."

"Not exactly," he said. Then he did not know why he added: "You've got pretty knees."

The girl glanced down at her bared legs, at her thighs, and was not at all embarrassed.

"You're the first man who ever said that to me," she said. She worked her horse closer to him until her bare knee brushed his levi-clad leg. "Here!"

Caught off guard, she grabbed his shirt front and drew him to her. She was more direct than Sue who had waited for him to kiss her and was disappointed. She shoved her mouth up against his, hot and urgent, in a passionate kiss that completely startled him. Almost as quickly, she broke away.

"It'll be your turn next time," she said.

She wheeled her horse out of the ford and hit a fast lope for home. Two girls had run away from Alec today. It was a mighty disturbing experience.

THE Professor and Speed Swift were waiting for him at his camp. They had butchered one of his steers, built a fine fire, and cooked a banquet. They greeted him like one of their dearest friends, both shaking hands with him as if working the pump handle for a Saturday night's bath. Speed Swift pounded Alec on the back. The Professor nodded sagely.

"You've done mighty well, Alexander." He waved a stubby hand to take in Antelope Park and all the livestock scattered through the fine grass. "And that lovely little lady—she couldn't be the daughter of *the* Jake Logan?"

"No, she couldn't be," Alec said. "She's their upstairs maid."

"This boy here's been drooling ever since he first laid eyes on that luscious nymph." The Professor indicated Speed. "Now tell Alec what you came up here to tell him, Speed."

Speed Swift spat into the fire. Alec thought that Speed had probably come up here to shoot him or to beat him to death with a rock.

"Ain't holdin' no grudges," Speed said.

"That shows what a great heart the boy has," the Professor commented. "They'd to peel half the skin off his back to patch up the damaged areas. Made medical history, it did. They wrote him up for the journals. And Speed loved every minute of it."

"Every second," Speed said.

"I'm sure glad to hear that," Alec said. "Sorry I haven't got some whiskey or a few girls to make this an occasion."

"Think nothing of it," the Professor said. "Speed and I heard you were going square. We thought: here's an old friend of ours who might need a little help to get started. We haven't got any money, but we do have willing hearts and hands. Maybe we can give you a little assist. So here we are."

Alec tried to look at the Professor's mental chessboard to see if he could understand their plan. He was too tired. He hadn't the slightest idea of what might be behind this move. He couldn't figure out any part of the play except that they planned on using him for something. Speed had never forgotten or forgiven the broiling. Between them they would squeeze him in a vise.

But tonight he couldn't fight it. He couldn't even face it.

"This is the happiest day of my life," he said. "Associating with my old friends. No walls—no bars—free men. But I got to go to bed."

"Pleasant dreams," the Professor said, "and on the morrow just call on us for anything your heart desires."

"I'll do that," Alec said.

"We'll even kidnap that upstairs maid for you," Speed offered with a wide grin.

"Or the belle with the black tresses who took you to church," the Professor added.

"Or both, huh?" Speed put in.

"Both, please," Alec said.

Alec didn't get it at all. His two old friends hung around all week giving him a hand as they had promised. The Professor ambled around the property in search of wild herbs that he used to flavor some remarkable dishes that he concocted of chickens and ducks that he slaughtered. Speed Swift helped with the corral, working like a regular hand. Alec took advantage of this hulk of a man to do some heavy lumbering and haul down timbers for his house. By Saturday noon when the pair took off for town, Alec had begun to wonder if he was crazy, or something. Though the Professor had been pretty generous with his butchering, Alec reckoned that he had nearly been paid back in labor. So Alec took the afternoon off and went for a swim. He was trying to creep up on a duck underwater when it suddenly occurred to him that he might have company again. Carefully he came to the surface, looked all around, and though he could not see anyone anywhere he had the feeling that he was being watched.

It spoiled his swim. After waiting there silently for several minutes, still seeing nothing, he clambered onto the bank, dried quickly and got into his clean outfit. He felt now as if there were eyes all about him. The security that he had felt when he first came up to this place had completely fled. None of the stock were disturbed. Everything was serene. But Alec became so nervous he finally had to saddle up and ride out of there. He had to go down and talk to Jake Logan.

Alec was afraid he might have trouble getting by Sue Logan, but she did not seem to be there though the scent of her was in the big house and just returning to it excited Alec.

In his log-walled quarters, Jake broke

out his tin cups and jug. His bushy eyebrows twisted in a frown.

"What's up, boy? What in hell are those two doing up there?"

"Working." Alec swirled the whiskey around in the cup. "The Professor's been cooking, and Speed's been doing a lot of heavy work, logging and stuff. I don't get it. The Professor uses lots of fancy seasoning in his stews. Maybe he's setting me up to poison me. Only what good would that do?"

The old man shuddered. "One thing they're doing is making the bank look silly. Everybody knows they're there. Henry is worried crazy."

"He's not the only one," Alec said morosely. "Well, here's to the ladies." He lifted his cup and downed his drink. "My friends pulled out at noon time," he said. "I hope to God they stay away."

The old man glared at him then with his eagle-like eyes. "Sue's been off her feed all week," he said. "Now, get on out there and cheer her up."

CHAPTER FOUR

Trapped

ALEC found her on the terrace drinking one of her tea and rums. She did not get up for him. She just grinned, in a not at all seductive way, and said, "Light and set, podner."

He sat within reach of the rum pitcher, just in case it did not occur to her to pour him one. But Sue did. It was a good drink. She was a beautiful female, and he liked her better when she did not pursue him. At least he thought he did; though, on the other hand, being chased by a girl like her was a real experience.

"I haven't given up," she said. "I'm just redeploying my forces."

"You had me guessing," Alec admitted.

She was in a shirtwaist and skirt, and when she crossed her legs her bare ankles above slippers seemed sleek as silk. She watched him like a buzzard contemplating a corpse.

"Your friends were by," she said. "The younger one looked stupid and as if he were interested in me. But the older one was very nice."

"He can be," Alec said, "when he wants to be."

"He said they'd been working for you. He said they'd reformed, too. He said you had a mighty nice spot up there, and I ought to see it."

"That's an idea," Alec agreed. "You ought to. Prettiest place in the world."

"Then I'll ride on up with you now, Alec," she announced.

Alec had only been joking, but she meant it. She got out of her chair, rustled across the bricks to him, and patted him on the cheek.

"Take me only a minute to change." She bent down and kissed him lightly on the lips. He felt as if he had been shot. Her faint, delicious scent was intoxicating. She rubbed her cheek against his and then stepped away. "Like the new tactics?" she asked.

Alec's answer was a faint gurgling sound. . . .

She rode well in a divided skirt and silk shirt, astride one of her fine thoroughbreds. He still preferred Morgans or palominos. At the ford, he found himself subtly comparing Sue to Jessie LaDoux. It wasn't fair to either girl, for they were totally different. Only the subtle femininity of them was the same, and Alec could not untangle that. Each had her grip on him, and the grip was growing steadily stronger. A man in his situation ought to be twins.

They rode on talking sometimes, sometimes silent; and when they talked, it was about nothing in particular. When they got over the rim and into the park, they reined in for a moment.

"I haven't been up here since I was a little girl," she said. "It's beautiful and it

frightens me. It always did. The Wild Bunch used to hole up here. They'd come in down Old Smoky Trail or over Killer Pass. I used to hear stories about them all the time. It's as if they are still here—or never went away—with those two horrible men hanging around."

"Up there." He pointed. "I'm going to build there."

She trotted ahead of him. It was late, and he wanted to start down before sunset. But at the camp she had to see everything, the tent, how he slept, and all the work that had been done. She ran down to the pond to watch the ducks steaming around like a tiny, white navy in formation. Impulsively, she took off shoes and stockings, then unbuttoned the skirt to step out of it clad in shimmering, ruffled shorts the same golden color as her hair.

She laughed at him. "You're shocked!" she said. "You're wonderful. That day I came up here so long ago I waded in here dressed like this. I never forgot it."

She went in up to her knees and deeper, the water caressing her legs. Playfully she splashed Alec until he retreated up the hill. When she came out, she danced lightly through the grass up to the tent, spread out the skirt and lay down flat on her back on it, staring at the sky.

"You'd think nothing bad could happen in a place like this," she said to Alec. "But I've been scared stiff ever since I heard those jailbirds were up here. Father'd die if you pulled some stunt with them. He took to you right away, Alec. He never had a son."

"Your father hasn't grown up," Alec said. "He's all wrong about Henry. The Bull's-Eye needs a bookkeeper to run it, not a cowboy. It's up here—at the start of a spread—that a ranch needs a strong back and maybe a weak mind."

She laughed. "I like the way you put it." She rolled over on her side, her hand propping up her head, her hip making a swooping curve against the deep color of the grass.

"Alec, will you marry me?"

"Not today," he said. "I'm more like your old man than you think. I couldn't stand that big white house. You'd die of lonesomeness up here."

"Maybe not," she said. Then she got to her hands and knees and crawled over to him. She sat on his lap with her head on his shoulder, the golden hair just below his chin. She made a mighty pleasant armful with her pliant waist and rounded legs, white in the light of the setting sun. But Alec was wary of her. He would never forget how she had blown up when Jessie dropped the book on the patio or when he neglected to kiss her down by the creek. Maybe she had changed her tactics, but not noticeably. Snuggled so close to him she was smaller than he had thought. "You'll change your mind," she whispered. "You'll change it. I know you will."

For a moment she was silent, her breath hot against his chest. She kissed him through the cloth of his shirt, then glanced up laughing silently. She kissed him under the chin, rubbing her nose against him, sending her arms around his neck. Then she kissed him long and warmly on the mouth. Alec knew that he wouldn't be able to resist that treatment much longer. But when he began to respond, she pushed her face away from his.

"Let's stay up here all night," she said. "I'll show you that I can take it." Capriciously she jumped up and stood before him. "I'm not scared any more of this valley or anything. I'm not scared of you. But you're afraid of me."

A lot more scared than you'd guess, he thought. Slowly he untangled his long legs. He towered over her.

"Get your skirt and doohickies on," he said, "and we'll head for the Bull's-Eye."

She laughed at him. He lunged for her, and she ducked away. She stood poised there, her feet well planted in the grass, a girl who could make a man's blood boil. He got it now: the new technique. She

was going to flirt with him and then snatch herself away until she drove him mad. But he tried to catch her just the same, and she ran nimbly down the slope to the pond. She let him feel that he was about to catch her. Then, at the last instant, she dove into the water and swam like an otter away from the shore. In the middle of the pond she twisted over onto her back, kicked up a spray of water with her heels and laughed.

Silently cussing her, Alec slumped down on a rock. Stars were popping out all over the sky. The girl cavorted like a mermaid or a porpoise. She challenged him to come and get her, but he did not answer. He reckoned he would let her drown before he would go out after her. When she got cold enough, she would come out. So he hiked back up to his camp and built a good, big fire. He fetched extra chunks of pitchy pine to toast the girl when she showed up.

* * *

It was about the same time that Henry Rotherman, alone in the bank, working on some ledgers and worrying about Alec Langley and his Huntsville friends, heard a noise that he thought might be a squirrel or a packrat. Henry wiped his glasses, put them back on and glanced up into the bore of a Colt .45. The man who held the gun was tall, lean, wide-shouldered. Henry loved money—but he loved life, too.

"I never did trust you, Alec," Henry said. "I knew you'd do this."

The man with the gun said nothing. He simply knocked Henry cold.

SUE finally came up to the fire, shivering. Like everything else she did, she shivered delightfully. Alec lost the will to bawl her out as he boiled water for fresh coffee. She went into his tent to take off her wet things, and borrowed a shirt of his that hung down almost to her ankles. After buttoning her skirt around her slender waist, she brought out her wet clothes to dry them before the fire. Alec thought there ought to be more of them though he could not decide exactly what, if anything, might be missing. She was mighty cute in the shirt that was so much too big for her. He told her so.

She huddled up close to the fire. It was a long while before she stopped shivering. She sipped at the coffee he handed her, and then he realized that she was getting set to lash out with her temper again.

"You're not in love with that skinny school teacher?" she asked. "I know she chased you up here a couple of times, but you're not in love with her, are you?"

All the flirtation was gone from the girl. Her red mouth had grown pale and hard. Her eyes were ice. Alec felt sorry for her suddenly. He wanted to do something to reassure her, but he did not know exactly what.

"I don't know any skinny school teachers," he said.

"Bah!" Sue snapped at him. "What's she to you?"

Alec had begun to wonder. He hadn't given it much thought until Sue jumped into the pond and he had climbed the knoll to build the fire. Then he had begun to match them up again, still knowing that the answer would be without meaning. It was like discussing the relative merits of beagles and blood hounds. Same kind of critter but suited to different kinds of jobs. He thought of telling her this but knew he could not explain it very well. There was no point in further talk, anyway. Nothing she did could affect him now. This didn't make any sense. But that's the way it was. A hot fire had burned away quickly.

He stood away from the fire, back into the shadows while she sulked in the heat and her flimsy garments steamed gently. Now, even with her here, he found peace again in this high, wide park. The cattle had bedded down. His chickens made an occasional squawk, and frogs were croaking, now that the ducks were asleep. Away off a dog bayed. A horse trotted smartly in the valley below.

"Any time you're ready to go—" Alec started.

Abruptly Sue jumped to her feet. She whipped around, facing him bitterly. Crazy, wild anger sharpened her face. No man had ever turned her down before. She ripped off his shirt, letting the buttons pop as they would, and flung the garment in his face. Then she reached for the dark silk shirt that was still damp and quickly put it on.

"I'm ready now," she said. "I hope it won't be too much bother seeing me home."

"Not at all," he said. "I'd be absolutely delighted."

They traveled slowly because of the darkness and the fact that the trail up from the valley was rough. After crossing the creek and hitting the flatter ground, they lifted their horses to a fast trot. When they came up to where they could see the Bull's-Eye, Sue reined her horse in so sharply he reared up and slid along on his back hoofs.

"What the hell?" she asked. "What's happened?"

The whole house was lighted up. In the yard were many saddled horses. A buckboard stood in a square of light, and behind the high columns men milled around on the gallery.

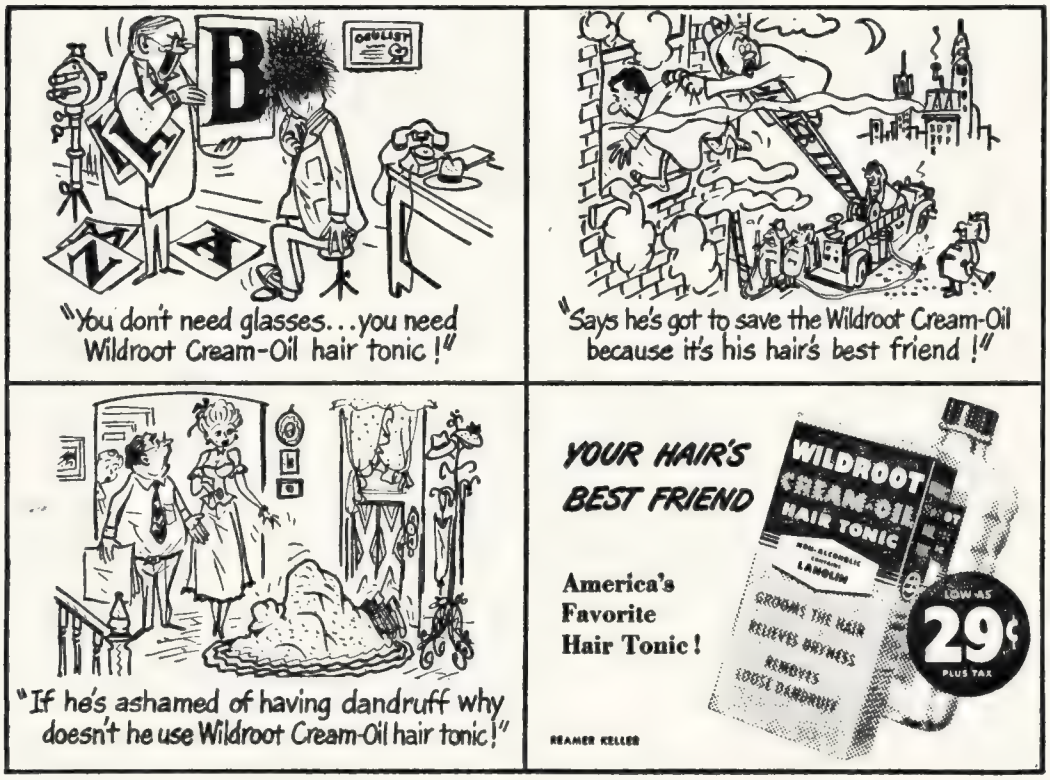
"They couldn't have missed me," Sue said. "I told father I was going to town."

Alec felt as if ice water was trickling down his spine. He had no notion as to what was going on, either. He put a hand on her arm. He was worried about her, too, now.

"Maybe it would be better if they didn't know you and I were together," he said. "I'll ride on down there. Can you get in the back way?"

"I can try," she said.

Alec brought the horse to a trot again. He caused no commotion when he came into the yard. The whole valley seemed aroused now. Nobody so much as noticed him when


"You don't need glasses...you need Wildroot Cream-Oil hair tonic!"
"Says he's got to save the Wildroot Cream-Oil because it's his hair's best friend!"
"If he's ashamed of having dandruff why doesn't he use Wildroot Cream-Oil hair tonic!"
YOUR HAIR'S BEST FRIEND
America's Favorite Hair Tonic!
WILDROOT CREAM-OIL HAIR TONIC
LANOLIN
GROOMS THE HAIR
RELIEVES DRYNESS
REMOVES LOOSE DANDRUFF
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he went up the steps to the gallery, across it and into the wide hall. There he spotted Henry Rotherman with a bandage across his bald head and Jake Logan glowering fiercely.

"What's up?" Alec asked innocently.

Henry turned on him and gaped. Jake's jaw worked wildly. The rest of the men were instantly alert, very tense, watching. Henry wagged his finger at Alec.

"Never knew . . . Such crass nerve . . ." Henry exploded. Alec wondered how they'd known Sue was with him, and why they cared so much to bring out half the valley.

Henry wagged his finger some more. "I insist that this man be arrested!" he shouted at no one in particular.

Old Jake wagged his head in sorrow and rage. "I put my faith in you, boy. You double-crossed us. And you're one hell of a damn good actor walking in on us like this after what you done. But you didn't fool nobody, even if your bloody friends do have ironbound alibis."

The puzzle only grew less understandable. Henry shouted again. "After what the bank did for you—you'd come down and clean us out. Ingrate!"

Alec started adding up. Henry had been banged on the head. The bank had been robbed. They were accusing him of it.

"And where were the Professor and Speed Swift when all this was going on?" Alec asked.

"As if you didn't know," Henry sneered at him. "Riding around in the starlight. Keeping attention off the bank while you came in and robbed us."

Alec's hackles tingled. Sue had come down the curving staircase, and she stood there in her slightly mussed outfit looking like a queen. She had managed to get in unnoticed. She could give him an alibi, too, but she only smiled like the Mona Lisa.

THEY had him boxed, neatly, perfectly. With the help of some unknown character the Professor and Speed Swift had robbed the bank and thrown the blame on him. This unknown would be about Alec's size and build. He'd be a fellow alumnus of Huntsville, probably. But he did not have to be an identical twin to Alec. The Professor had taken care of that detail by planting it firmly in the minds of the valley people that he and Speed had come to town to help their old pal, Alec, pull a job.

The Professor knew how to work out his chess problems. But he had given Alec more than one lesson in looking at the other fellow's game.

Alec asked, his voice low and hoarse: "Where are they now—Speed and the Professor?"

"Who gives a damn?" Henry Rotherman asked. "They're gone. They said they were afraid you'd do something like that. You did. Who cares where they went. I don't!"

The men had crowded into the hall and the huge parlor. One and all, they condemned him. On the staircase, Sue Logan's smile grew even more mysterious. Alec could see plainly that she enjoyed every minute of this. His fury rose and overflowed.

"I care where they went!" he shouted at Henry. "Find them and you'll find the loot. I *know* I *didn't* rob your damned bank. No matter what you say. They engineered it and put me in the middle. That's what they came here for . . ."

He ran out of breath. Jake Logan was as broken-hearted as his daughter was delighted. Henry was scornful.

"You might as well confess, Langley," he suggested. "It'll go easier with you in the end."

"I'll confess to wanting to push your foolish face in," Alec snapped. Sue laughed then, and Alec would have enjoyed wringing her lovely neck. She wasn't going to talk. Nor would it do to ask her to alibi him. Something in Alex kept him from it, and it wasn't the fact that she probably would lie anyway.

Alec's mind was travelling the shadowed trails with the Professor and Speed, but Alec's body was nailed down here by a score of hostile men all heavily armed. "That loot won't do me any good in jail, Henry," he said softly. "It won't help you if you can't find it. I know how the Professor's mind works. Let me go hunt it up for you."

Sue laughed aloud. Henry smiled as if Alec had gone crazy. Jake only wanted out. The men who had gathered as a posse to hunt him down were growing impatient. Then from the door a girl spoke up clearly. "I've got this shotgun loaded with old nails," she said. "I'm backing Alec. So are you, Henry. You come here. You're coming, too, you Jezebel. Come on over."

Sue began to back up the stairs. Jessie let go with one barrel of her shotgun over Sue's head. Plaster splattered from the ceiling and white paint flew as rusty nails plowed into it. Sue froze. Old Jake Logan grinned. He dragged out the two old six-shooters he had not used in years.

"I'm backing you, girl!" he said. "But if you're wrong, I'm going to slit Alec's throat with my own stock knife. Slit it slow."

No one dared go against the old man. He had been authority here when most of the men gathered at the Bull's-Eye were children. He was boss still—backed up with his brace of single-action Colts and the school teacher's lethal shotgun.

The group broke up into three posses to scour the country on all sides, and the posse led by Alec headed up into Antelope Park and the Old Smoky Trail.

"The Professor used to talk about riding with the Wild Bunch," Alec explained. "I thought he was boasting, but I'll bet he knows those back trails and is using them for his getaway."

"I know them!" Jake Logan said shortly. "Figure you can stay on that hoss, Henry?"

"This is ridiculous," Henry said.

Old Jake snorted. "I never seen nothing funnier in my life, Henry. Just hang onto that knob there on that chair we tied down to your horse and you won't have nothing to worry about but a sore tail."

They rode out fast. At the ford, Alec managed to slip his hand into the school teacher's for one quick grip. She said, "Salud!" and he grinned. It was slow going for a while, climbing up to Antelope Park. Only the faintest embers were left from the fire Alec had built to dry out Sue. The poles were down on his corral, and the horses gone. Alec's supplies had been looted.

The old man hesitated, like a gray wolf keening the evening breeze, searching for a kill.

"We don't know when they came through here," he said. "Two-three hours ago. They have fresh horses. If they made for the pass, we can't catch them. But if they made for the Devil's Den, we got them in a trap. We'll go there."

Alec nodded. The Professor had cased the whole valley pretty well during his helpful stay. More than likely he had been reknewing old landmarks, searching for a hideout good for a day or two. More than likely he had laid a trail up through the pass to mislead anyone who might pursue him.

"I think you got it there, Jake," he said.

Jake said: "We'll take it slow. We don't want to get there before daylight."

He led the way around the wide meadow, through the aspens and down to the jumble of rocks that was East Mountain. There they dismounted and left their horses. As the sun shot its first spears over the high crags, the little band dispersed. Sue found Alec briefly alone.

"I could tell them," she said.

"Don't." He patted her shoulder. "We'll make out."

A shot rang out; lead and rock chips flew about Alec's head. Alec fell flat on his stomach with Sue on top of him. Old Jake let go with a Comanche war cry. At the same time something happened to Henry.

Henry built an imitation of Jake's fighting yell and scrambled right up those rocks to the point where the first shot had come from.

Now all hell had broken loose. Alec crawled out from under Sue Logan and followed Henry. He got in a shot at Speed Swift who had leveled a rifle on him. Alec was hit but didn't know it. He saw the Professor make his last move in his endless game of chess and bank robbing. When he tried to escape from that rocky den, someone from below picked him off. When the coroner examined him later on, he found three bullet holes in the ancient crook.

Alec kept going, searching for Speed with his lead. He wasted his cartridges. His first shot had ended forever the career of the man who had studied so hard to excel in every possible draw.

Henry had a captive, a tall, lean young man about Alec's size and age. He was scared stiff.

"They talked me in to it," he said hastily. "They said we couldn't miss."

Alec grinned at him. "No crook ever does lose," he said. "Take your friends." He started down the slope, Jake stopped him.

"There's a man up there," he said. "A man named Henry. Where's Sue? Have you seen her?"

"She's looking for that man," Jake grinned. "He'll like the white house."

Then Alec saw Jessie and ran to her. The slope was too steep. Near the bottom he tripped, fell over and rolled down like a tumble weed to bowl her over. They ended in a laughing, hugging heap under a stubby pine tree.

"Can you move your school up to Antelope Park?" he whispered in her ear.

"No," she said, wriggling deliciously against him. "But I can move the school teacher."

Which suited Alec fine. ★ ★ ★

MY KINGDOM FOR A HORSE!

By Allan K. Echols

It may not be long in terms of geological time when a man will have to offer more than his kingdom for a horse, because there won't be any horses left. At the rate things are going, some future rancher's son is likely to see a strange animal in a zoo some day and ask his father what it is. His father might have to think pretty hard before recalling old legends about the time cowboys worked cattle while riding on the backs of long-extinct animals called horses.

This sounds a little pessimistic, the horse census figures tell the story. The number of horses as of January 1952 was checked at 4,570,000, which was a decrease of 12 percent from 4,993,000 head, the number of horses counted the previous year. Work horses have decreased in number steadily since their peak in the year 1915, when there were 21,431,000 animals.

In less than fifty years, horses have disappeared so fast that today there is only one horse alive for every five that we had in 1915. That is, eighty percent of them have vanished in 36 years.

If horses continue to disappear at their present rate, it would seem to be mathematically certain that they would become extinct in the next ten years. ★ ★ ★

LAWDOG'S LADY

By C. Hall Thompson

So big, tough and confident was Sheriff Longtree, that he never dreamed anyone—least of all his glamorous wife—could threaten either his position, or his life!

THE Sheriff made a habit of it. He liked the early air in the quiet, dusty streets of Alamosa and the sleepy stir of false-faced buildings. At ten, he stood in the yellow sunlight on his office-step and lit his first cigar of the day. He was a blunt, ruddy man with hard eyes that could laugh cruelly. But he was in a

fine mood now. He nodded the day to a Negro swamper and old Noah Goodyear, just opening his general store, and turned down Don Jaime Street on his morning tour.

"Hello, Sheriff."

He had come to expect the voice. He paused, smoking, to watch the little man called Chadwell cross the boardwalk from his law office.

The Sheriff smiled. This was the man who had run against him for the job of lawdog, two months ago when he had first settled in Alamosa. Chadwell had been a leading citizen, then, sure of his votes, but the toughness and determination of Big Will Longtree (and a little cash in the right places) had won the day. It must have been a rough pill for pipsqueak Chadwell to swallow, Sheriff Longtree thought. He grinned, sucking the cigar.

"Mind if I walk a ways with you, Sheriff?"

Meek, boot-licking Chadwell. Kick him and he always came back for more. Longtree laughed.

"Why should I mind?"

"Oh . . . you being such a big man in town, now. . . ."

"Never can tell, Chadwell. You might be my successor, someday." The humor was heavy with sarcasm, but Chadwell seemed not to notice.

They walked. Chadwell adjusted his glasses. "Mighty fine morning, Sheriff."

"Sure is."

"I imagine Mrs. Longtree likes the morning air, too."

The Sheriff smiled, thinking of the slim girl with honey-colored hair; the quiet girl who was his wife. Chadwell cleared his throat.

"I see her out riding every morning."

"Been a mite peaked, lately." Longtree nodded to a passing granger.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Seems to think these early morning rides'll perk her up."

"Yes. Of course. Usually up along the old mine trail, eh?"

The Sheriff bit his cigar. This Chadwell could be a pest. A regular old biddy, knowing everything that went on in Alamosa.

They passed the Occidental Saloon and waved to a barkeep, rubbing sleep from his eyes. Chadwell smiled under his lank mustache.

"Funny, Mr. Druce being up and about so early."

The Sheriff frowned. If there was one thing in Alamosa that rubbed his fur the wrong way, it was Sam Druce. He didn't like the tall, blond figure in the dark suit and too-clean linen shirt. The long, white hands that dealt monte and poker for a living at the Occidental somehow made Longtree uneasy.

"Up and about?" he said.

"Saw him ride out about an hour ago." The smile held a hint of gossip. "Up to his old tricks, I reckon."

The Sheriff let it go. For some reason, the walk was going wrong this morning. The sun didn't seem so warm and good on his shoulders. They swung south along the spur-rails of Terminal Street.

"Expect you know more about him than I do," Chadwell said.

"About him?"

"Sam Druce."

Longtree chewed the cigar, and Chadwell said, "Understand you been seeing a lot of him since you met at that big hoedown, right after you come to town. You and the Missus."

"Why should we ever want to see a lot of him?"

Chadwell lifted pale brows. "You don't?" He laughed. "Reckon it was just a notion of mine."

THEY walked. Buckboards and horses kicked up grit clouds along the street. Some honkatonk girls were sunning on their adobe doorsteps. A burly man in a

striped jersey and celluloid collar loaded empty beerkegs into a wagonbed. He didn't look up as they passed.

"I reckon he's the kind you get notions about," Chadwell said casually, staring straight ahead.

The cigar had gone out. The Sheriff didn't refire it. He walked stiffly now and a little faster.

"Got quite a reputation, this Druce. Fastest gun in these parts, they say."

The street bent under dappled juniper shade and then turned east again along Union.

Longtree scowled at the dust. The hands, he thought. The white, quick, sure fingers that always made him uneasy. His neck felt hot. Longtree was big and hard-cut, but a fast draw wasn't his long point.

"And then," Chadwell smiled, "there's the way he amuses himself. Sort of a pastime, you might say."

"Amuses?"

"Well, stories do get around. Ever since Druce came to Alamosa, the ladies been giving him the eye. Hear tell he's even got a cabin up along the old mine trail where he meets his loves. Some of them decent, respectable married women, too. Women you'd think butter'd melt in their mouths. But, when Sam Druce smiles at them . . ."

The bony shoulders shrugged. "One of these days, though, some hot-headed husband's going to catch wise, and then Sam Druce'll get his come-uppence. Funny, they say the husband's always the last to know. . . ."

They were on Don Jaime again. Chadwell's voice trailed off.

"Well, it's been a nice walk, Sheriff, but I reckon we're both pretty busy, so I'll leave you now."

Longtree's teeth were clamped hard on the dead cigar. There was no expression on his face.

"I've got my briefs, and you've got your law enforcing." Chadwell laughed.

All the sheriff said was, "Yeah."

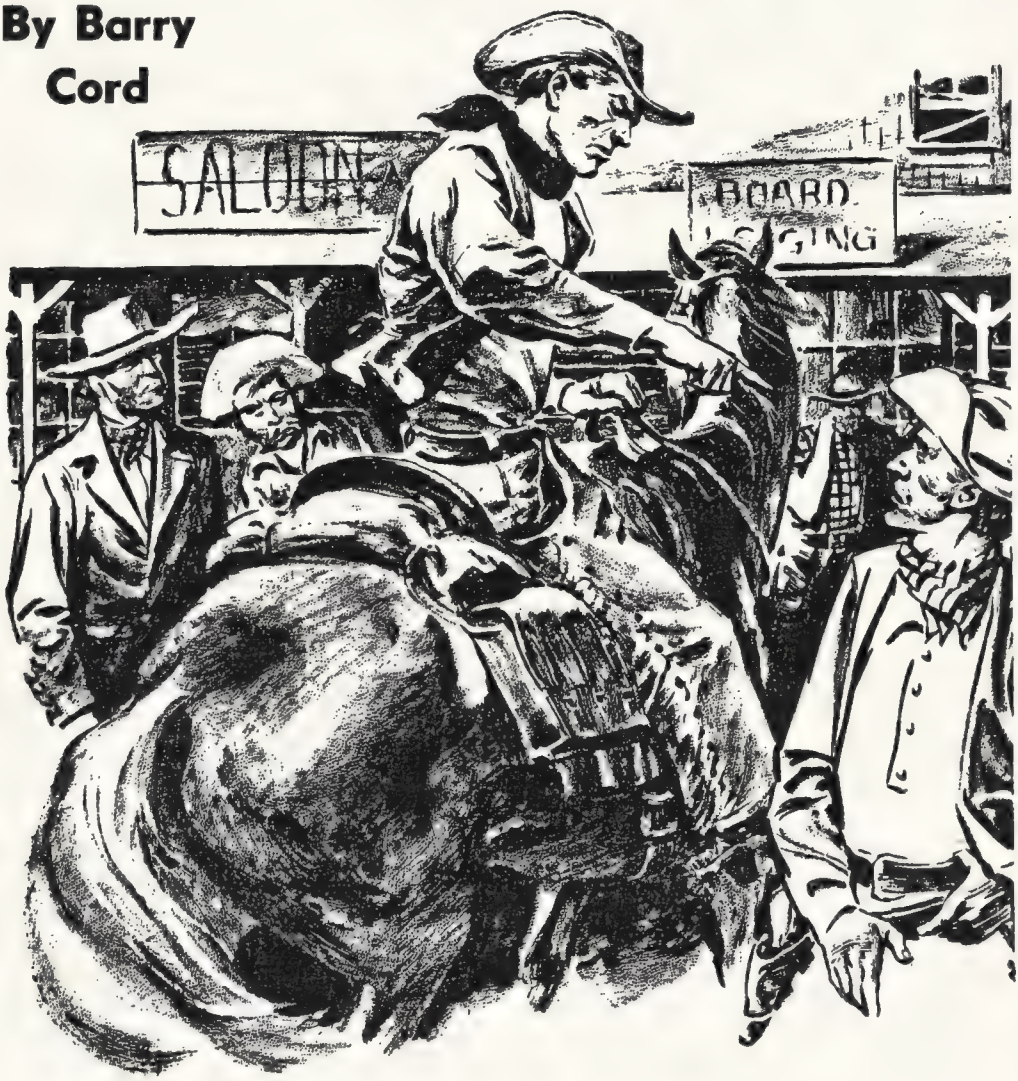
"And give my respects to Mrs. Longtree. I'm sure she's right. Those morning rides'll do her a world of good."

Without answering, Sheriff Longtree cut across the wagon ruts toward his office. He didn't go inside. He hitched the brace of Colts on squat hips and swung up into the saddle of his strawberry roan. He directed the horse out along Don Jaime. He didn't look left or right. Narow in the flat, red tightness of his face, his eyes searched north, to where the road widened and lifted along a slow rise to the old, winding mining trail.

From his doorway, Chadwell watched. After a long time, he went out and crossed the street, going into the musty, cool shadows of the sheriff office. He walked boldly, like a man going home. He touched the oak desk affectionately and smiled and opened one of the drawers. The extra badge lay there, bright and cold. Slowly, Chadwell picked it up and turned to the cracked mirror over the washbowl. He pinned the star on his black vest and stood smiling, admiring and staring at his reflection. ★★★

GUNMEN'S GIRLS WON'T

By Barry Cord



Lovely Melina was the one person in Sundown who had hated to see Steve Corrin leave. . . . And now, five long years later, she hated even more to see him ride back!

COMING down the old path leading from the Upper Jay, Melina Davis saw the rider on the town road, and her first thought was one of pleasant surprise. *Clay's early!* And because it was unlike the man she was about to marry to be either late or early about appointments, she paused and looked again.

WAIT!

The scene down the street seemed suddenly unreal to Melina. . . .

The rider turned toward the ranch, and Melina frowned. She was on a grassy knoll with a stand of jackpine at her back, and she could look down on her father's modest ranch, the neatly kept buildings, the meadow that separated her from the L-shaped house. This was a scene she had known from early childhood. But the rider coming to the Boxed D was not Clayton Ross. . . .

She had her hands thrust carelessly into the pockets of her blue jeans, her tan cotton blouse was open at her throat, and her brush jacket lay in the crook of her left arm. And through the numbness of her surprise ran the aching thought: *He's come back! Steve Corrin's come back!*

Her face was flushed, for it was a warm day, and her hair, dark brown and alive with highlights, had shaken itself loose from its bun. Some of it straggled across her face. She was suddenly aware of her appearance, and she thought miserably: *I can't let him see me like this!*

And then she remembered Peggy Higgens, and the hurt was still there after five years. She pulled her lips in tight, remembering this man's departure from Sundown. "Yes—you've come back!" she muttered. "Four years too late!" And she no longer cared how she looked as she walked down the path to the house.

Steve Corrin was talking to her father as she came into the yard. Tod Baxter, their handyman, was chopping wood in front of the shed. He was working leisurely, and with an old bachelor's curiosity, had his ear cocked to the conversation.

"I'm sorry to hear that, John," Steve was saying. "Somehow, I always linked you and Sundown Valley together."

He was still in saddle, and as he turned to look at Melina she saw the changes in him. Most of the transformation was inside the man. Melina had known Steve well. And now, deliberately studying this tired, dusty rider sitting in the harsh glare of the sun, she saw that something had robbed this man of the gay recklessness that had attracted the girls in Sundown. Steve Corrin was still lean, wiry, dark-headed and good-looking, but there was a mature hardness to his mouth, and his gray eyes, which had danced to every flicker of emotion, now revealed little.

Though Melina had heard the stories that had come back to Sundown about this man, she was unprepared for the change. For Melina remembered Steve with the eyes of a girl who had been in love. And to her Steve Corrin had remained the wild, reckless youth who, coming to town for the Saturday night dances, would key up the night the same as a strong drink could. That was how he had affected her then. But she had been seventeen—and she hadn't known about Peggy Higgens.

He was looking at her, his eyes sombre, and a faint smile touched his lips as he fingered his hat. "Afternoon, Melina."

She acknowledged the greeting with a slight nod of her head. "This is a surprise," she said curtly. "You're the last person I'd expect to see ride back to Sundown!"

He drew back slightly, as if he had been flicked with a whip, and his eyes left him naked for a moment, open to her bitter anger. Then he murmured drily: "Sometimes a man gets a hankering for old scenes, Miss Davis."

She ran her unfriendly gaze down the hard length of him, letting it linger on the dusty holster and the palm-slicked walnut butt jutting above it. "That gun always was your trademark, Steve Corrin," she remarked. "We've heard how you've made yourself quite a reputation with it since you've left Sundown. But really, we have no use for your talents here."

John Davis was frowning. "Now, now, Melina," he interupted brusquely. "Maybe we could use a man who can't be pushed around. A man who's handy with a gun." He turned his attention to Steve, grumbling a half apologetic explanation. "'Course, it ain't my fight any more, Steve. I'm through

in Sundown. But there's others who need . . ." He glanced sidewise at his daughter and shrugged, his mouth hardening.

Steve murmured, "Sundown won't be the same without the Davises. You've got a nice spread here, John. Seems a pity to let it go."

"Dad's too old to run it the way it should be run," Melina answered coldly. "And I'm leaving the valley in September."

"Leaving?"

John Davis nodded. "Melina's getting married next month. To Attorney Clayton Ross. You wouldn't know him, Steve," he added heavily. "He came to Sundown two years ago. They plan to move north to Dallas, right after the wedding."

A faint glimmer of the old Steve made its ghostly appearance in the tired man on the weary piebald. "Congratulations, Miss Davis," he said. He settled back in saddle. "Five years have changed a lot of things in Sundown," he observed wryly.

Davis nodded. "Planning to stay in town?"

"I was," Steve admitted frankly. "But I reckon I'll drift on." His smile was cold, polite. "Like your daughter made plain, John, Sundown ain't partial to my kind."

He nodded shortly, touched his hat brim to Melina, and swung the piebald around. His back was straight as he rode away, and he didn't look back.

John Davis was frowning as he turned to his daughter. "For a gal who used to see a lot of Steve, you were mighty unfriendly. There was a time when—"

Melina's tone was sharp. "He was Peggy's man, Dad—not mine!"

John Davis shrugged. "Peggy talked a lot," he muttered. "But somehow I didn't think young Corrin . . ." He brushed the back of his hand across his mouth and looked after the dwindling rider. "Just the same, Melina, that's the man we need here, now. I don't care what happened five years ago. Sometimes I feel I'm running out on my neighbors just when they need me most. You know how Bollinger's crowding all the little ranchers, along the Jay. He's like old Nafzinger was, getting too big for his britches!"

But Melina was thinking of something else, and her bitter thoughts found expression: "He should never have come back!"

John Davis put his arm across her shoulders, understanding pushing aside his worry. "Don't be hard on him, gal. He was like a boy who'd come a long way to get home, when I first saw him."

Melina shrugged curtly. "Let's check back over your figures, Dad," she said, dismissing Steve. "Clay promised he'd bring a buyer with him when he called. And," she linked her arm through his and smiled anxiously, "I wish you'd quit worrying about Bollinger and the others."

John nodded soberly. "I wish I could," he said simply.

CLAYTON ROSS was a prompt man. He had said he would be at the Boxed D at two, and five minutes before that time Melina saw his dust on the road from town. A heavy man rode with him.

They had been waiting for Clay in the wicker chairs on the veranda. John Davis uncrossed his long legs and came to his feet, frowning. "Isn't that Frank Bollinger with him?"

Melina shaded her eyes. She waited, not speaking, until the two riders came into the yard, and even without looking at him she sensed her father's displeasure. The big man with Clay was Bollinger, sitting solid and arogant in saddle—a big man in expensive fawn-colored riding britches and shirt, soft suede jacket and extra-wide-brimmed cream Stetson.

Ross dismounted at once and came up the stairs. He was barely two inches taller than Melina. A small man, clean-shaven, sharp-featured. A small, energetic, driving man.

He put his hands on her shoulders and

kissed her with definite possession. "You look lovely," he said. He turned to her father and said briskly: "Good afternoon, Mr. Davis." It was still "Mister" Davis, even though he was marrying his daughter, and John Davis knew there would never be anything closer between them.

"Mr. Davis," he began flatly, "I believe you've met Frank Bollinger?"

John Davis nodded. Bollinger swung heavily out of saddle. "Sure," he boomed good-naturedly. "You might say we're neighbors, Clay."

Davis ignored him. He looked at his daughter. "Did you know who Ross was bringing here this afternoon?"

Melina bit her lip. "No," she admitted. "But what difference does it make who the buyer is, Dad? You—"

"I'm particular who I'll sell to," John snapped. He nodded curtly at Ross and turned to the door.

Bollinger stopped short at the foot of the stairs. "Now wait a minute, Mr. Davis. I've come prepared to—"

John slammed the screen door, drowning out his words.

The big man's face flushed. He glanced at Ross, and the lawyer shrugged uncomfortably. "I didn't think he'd take it like this, Mr. Bollinger." Ross' tone had a shade of servility that annoyed Melina.

"I apologize for my father's rudeness," Melina said. "But it's his ranch, and if he doesn't want to sell to you—"

Bollinger didn't even wait to hear her out. "He'll sell!" he said, his voice shaking. "And on my own terms now!" He put his angry, uncompromising gaze on Ross. "I'll give you until tomorrow noon to talk to the old fool! Then I'll handle it the other way!"

He went back to his horse and mounted, a big, angry man who didn't intend to be sidetracked.

Melina's eyes snapped. "Clay, who does he think he is!"

"He's a big man in Sundown," Ross said soberly. He had been shaken by the turn of events, and the subdued look in his eyes irritated Melina. He made a quick gesture with his hands. "He was prepared to pay more than the Boxed D is worth, Melina."

"And who was judging the Boxed D's worth?" Melina snapped.

Ross mustered a small smile. "Melina, you're upset." He put his hand on her arm, adding quickly. "We'll be leaving here soon. The troubles of Sundown are not ours. And I was only thinking of helping your father get the best price he could."

Melina had a sudden uncomfortable recollection of Steve Corrin as he had looked that morning. Hearing again the quiet disappointment in his voice: *Somehow I always linked the Davises and Sundown together.*

Then she blotted out the picture of that man who had come back to Sundown.

"I would sell to Bollinger or anyone else," she said, her voice softening. "But it's a matter of pride with Dad. You must see that, Clay. If Dad sold to Bollinger, he would be selling out Jenkins, Pardee and Meegham. I've heard Dad talk. If Bollinger got the Boxed D, he could cut them off the upper Jay—"

"That's their worry," Clay interrupted coldly. "Not your—not ours. And once I collected my fee—"

She turned on him. "Clay, are you in on this?"

He met her angry gaze directly, and his lips tightened stubbornly. "Well, I'm an attorney, Melina. And I've been hired by Bollinger to represent him in this matter."

"Because he thought you could do what he knew he couldn't! Because you're marrying me, Bollinger thought Dad would sell if you asked him!"

"What's wrong with that?" Ross snapped, nettled. Melina saw the sharpness in his eyes, and in that short moment she glimpsed what the future would hold for her with this man. Smoothness, respect, a surface gentility that would turn to heat-

less cruelty when he was crossed. What this man wanted would come first. It would always come first, even before her.

"We're leaving Sundown!" Ross repeated. "Bollinger's check will set me up in Dallas. You've no stake here, Melina," he added harshly. "Why should it matter that Bollinger hired me to arrange a business deal? Why—"

Melina cut him short. "Because Dad will still have a stake in Sundown. I'm going with you to Dallas, but Dad will be staying. He'll move to town. Do you think he could face his old friends if he sold them out to Bollinger?"

Ross sneered faintly. "Business deals are rarely concerned with friendships. And Bollinger is a hard man, Melina. He wants the Boxed D, and he'll get it. I'm only trying to save your father from getting hurt."

Melina stiffened. "You mean he's threatened Dad?"

Ross frowned. "You know the situation in the valley. If anything happens to your Dad, it will either be done so as to appear an accident, or it won't be done before witnesses. And I don't have to remind you of the quality of the law enforcement here. After all, this is still frontier country."

There was a sudden empty feeling in Melina, depriving her even of anger. "Clay," she said thinly, "If I hadn't heard you say it, I would not have believed it."

Ross mistook her tone for acquiescence. "Now, Melina," he said gently. "You understand I am only trying to help your father. Get him to sell, and we'll leave Sundown with clear hearts. He can come live with us, if he—"

She pulled away from him. "Dad would die first!" she said. She looked into his face, seeing the effect of her words there. "I find this rather easy to say, Clay. I think it's because I've never really been sure. But I know now. And I'm glad I found it out before it was too late . . . for

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both of us! For both you and me."

"Found out what?" he snapped.

"I don't want to marry you. I wouldn't make you a good wife!"

He pulled her roughly toward him. "Melina, what are you saying?"

"I can't marry you, Clay," she said flatly.

"Why?" There was a shocked, cruel glint in his sharp gray eyes. "Just because I brought Bollinger up here? If that's the reason, I'll break off—"

"No," she said coldly. "It's not Bollinger. It's because I find that I don't really want to go to Dallas. I didn't realize that until right now. And I don't want Dad to sell the Boxed D!"

His fingers hurt her. "You little fool! If you think you can turn me down now and make me the laughingstock in town! You'll regret it, Melina!"

She said flatly: "Take your hands away, Clay!"

His small frame shivered with the sudden ugliness of his temper. But he stepped back. "I'll see you again," he said confidently. "You'll change your mind."

"You know me so little," she said quietly. Then she turned her back on him and went into the house.

Her father was standing by the kitchen table, kneading tobacco into his pipe. They both stood, waiting, until the sound of Ross' departure faded into the drowsy heat.

John Davis said quietly: "What changed your mind, Melina?"

She didn't answer. She went to him, burying her face against his rough shirt, and though the tears wouldn't come, her shoulders shook with emotion.

SUNDOWN sprawled in a bend of the Jay, a sleepy little town which had existed almost twenty years and had taken its time about growing. Oaks and cedar cast their shade along both sides of the main street, now dignified by the title of Morgan Avenue. But it was still the town Corris had known—the Sundown he had known as child, boy and young man.

The town still retained that quality which as a younger, restless man had fretted him—the peace of Sundown along the Jay. But as he came back now, with the sun slanting its red banners across the road, he had the sour and bitter thought that all things change, even Sundown. He had seen it in the face of a tired man at the Boxed D, and in the unfathomably hostile attitude of a girl he had ridden six hundred miles to see again.

He turned into Morgan Avenue, thinking without importance that this was Friday evening. Several light wagons were clustered around the general store, two saddle horses waited hipshot at the rail of one of the bars. Steve rode past these and turned in at the Four Palms Saloon.

He had never been a drinking man, but the ride had been long and dry, and he needed a lift. Besides, a man could pick up almost as much in a bar as in a barber's chair.

Joe Beakes, he found, had changed in five years. Steve remembered him as a jovial two hundred-pounder. He scarcely recognized the sour-faced, thin, unsmiling man who came to wait on him.

Beakes barely glanced at him. He said: "What'll you have, stran . . ." He was wiping his hands matter-of-factly on his apron, when recognition jerked his eyes to Corris again. *"Steve!"* He extended a hand. "This is a surprise!"

Steve shook hands. "I've been running into surprises all day," he made talk. "I had to look twice to make sure you were the Joe Beakes I knew."

The barman belched softly. "Sorry," he mumbled. "Bad stomach. More than a year now." The lines down the sides of his mouth were deep. "Hurts all the time, kid." He reached for a bottle of whiskey and a glass, but Steve said: "I'll have beer, Joe."

The barman drew him a tall one. "On

the house," he said. He glanced at Steve's gun. "You made quite a name for yourself, Steve. El Paso, Cochrise, Santa Fe, Taos. All kinds of stories—"

"Stories have a habit of getting better with every open mouth," Steve commented dryly.

Joe shrugged. "You used to be pretty wild. Too much for Sundown, if I remember." He grinned faintly. "But I got an idea some of the folks will be glad to see you back, Steve."

He had looked forward to coming back, he reflected, but a girl had changed that. He had run full tilt into the full lash of her hostility, and he didn't know why. All the way in to town he had tried to find some reason for Melina's attitude, but had had to give up.

"Staying, Steve?"

"Huh? Oh," he shook his head, "just drifting through, I guess, Joe."

"Been a few changes since you pulled your freight, Steve. A big man named Frank Bollinger bought out the Double Rail. Fired the old hands, brought in new faces. Some of the old settlers along the East Jay moved out of the valley—some new ones came in."

"Sam Ulston?"

"Dead. Last year. Drowned trying a crossing of the Jay last spring. Made a good deputy sheriff, but drank too much. Carl Sillman took his place."

Steve drank his beer. Joe moved off to serve a newcomer, and Steve took this opportunity to leave. He found he had no interest in what had happened in Sundown.

Out on the walk he had the sudden impulse to get back into saddle and ride on. But the piebald needed a night's rest. So he rode on down to Wyatt's stables and turned the animal over to a pasty-faced youngster he did not recognize.

"Where's Wyatt?" he asked.

"In the hospital at Benbow," a voice answered behind him. Steve turned to face a tall, bony man with a star on his vest. The man had a nervous way about him. His eyes moved too fast, as if he wanted to see everything, everywhere at once.

"Hello, Carl," Steve greeted. Carl was about his age, twenty-four. He had been one of the bunch Steve had whooped things up with. He had never cared much for the man, considering him somewhat of a weak sister. It was a surprise to see him wearing a lawman's badge.

"Staying in town, Steve?"

"Depends," Steve answered offhandedly.

"We've got an ordnance in Sundown," Carl said anxiously, "about wearing a gun." His tone was almost apologetic.

"Sure, Carl," Steve obliged. "I'll stow it." He unbuckled his cartridge belt, wound it about his holster and slipped it in his saddle bag. "Kinda get used to packing it and forgot," he said, grinning. "Sundown looks peaceful enough."

Carl relaxed. "It is. All except for a few soreheads."

"Soreheads?"

"Yeah. Jenkins, Meegham an' Pardee. You remember them. Got two-by-four spreads along Upper Jay."

Steve remembered. They were neighbors of John Davis. He inquired casually: "What happened to Wyatt?"

"Ate too much," Carl said, grinning. His nervousness was lessened by Steve's relaxed manner. "I always said Wyatt would eat himself into an early grave. He's up at Benbow with stomach trouble."

"Regular epidemic," Steve chuckled. "Say, what happened to Peggy Higgens?"

The grin faded from Carl's face. He said cautiously: "Don't you know?"

Steve frowned. "Know what?"

Carl said hurriedly: "She married that grain salesman from Benbow right after you left. She's living in Benbow now."

Steve grinned faintly. "She was pretty wild herself. Glad to hear she's settled down."

His smile faded as Carl said hurriedly: "Yeah. Well, I'll see you, Steve." The

deputy turned and moved off down the walk.

"Well, what in hell bit him?" Steve growled.

HE WAS alone in the dining room of the DROVER'S HOTEL where he had signed for a room when Jenkins came up to him. Steve had barely known Jenkins in the old days. A bitter-cheeked, small, narrow-shouldered man of fifty-odd years now, a man who had married late in life and now had five children, all of them still too small to help out much. Jenkins, Steve remembered wryly, had been outspoken in his opinions of Steve Corris.

"Steve!" Jenkins said. "Heard you were back."

He grabbed a chair and sat down without waiting for Steve's invitation. He was dark from the sun, and weather and worry had not been kind to him. He looked old and withered, but there was fight in his blue eyes.

"I ain't gonna beat around the haystack," he said bluntly. "You were a wild kid, an' pretty cocky, too, an' I was glad when you shucked out of here."

A faint anger stirred in Steve. "Thanks," he said dryly. "You want me to ride on?"

"No, I want you to stay." Jenkins grinned sourly. "Let me have my say, Steve. Then, if you kick me out through that door, maybe you'll be right. But let me have my say."

Steve leaned back and spread his hands.

"I was glad to see you gone," Jenkins repeated. "But I am glad to see you've come back. If the stories we've heard about you are fifty percent true, you're the man we need here now. We're being shoved around by a range hog named Bollinger. There ain't a one of us who can stand up to him, or the hardcases he's brought in. He's bought Carl Sillman, body an' soul—"

"And you want me, the wild, bad boy who was no good for Sundown—you want *me* to fight your fight?"

Jenkins nodded. "Reckon that's what it amounts to," he said. "The fight's mine an' the rest of the folks along the Upper Jay."

Steve's grin was bleak. "Go to hell!" he said softly.

Jenkins jerked. His lips came down tightly over his stubby teeth. "I don't blame you much," he said slowly. "But this was your town once, Steve. You grew up here. I thought—"

"I'm leaving in the morning," Steve said coldly.

Jenkins hesitated. Then he got to his feet and walked out without another word. Steve let his anger simmer down and then found he had lost his appetite. He got up and drifted out to the street.

The shadows merged almost quickly into the darkness of night. Steve rolled a cigarette and felt lost and lonely, as if he had never grown up here, and knew no one. Outwardly the town looked the same. But it had changed. Or he had changed. He wasn't sure. But he suspected the change was more in himself.

It had come to him suddenly, as he had walked up to his dingy room in the hotel, what he wanted. And tired as he was, he had come down, saddled and headed for Sundown.

Inside him a cynical voice chided him. What reason had he had to expect Melina Davis to wait five years for him to find out what he should have known before he left? He had seen a lot of her. But then, he had seen other girls, too. Why should she have waited? He had promised her nothing.

Two riders came by, moving at a jog, and he glanced up to see that they wore guns openly. They rode past and headed for the Ace of Clubs Saloon. Steve saw Carl standing on the corner, but the deputy made no move to intercept these riders who were openly breaking his town ordnance.

Hell with it! Steve thought wryly, and turned back to the hotel.

* * *

The town seemed to expand on Satur-

day. Wagons, buggies and riders started coming in, making Sundown a busy little place. Steve ate a leisurely breakfast. He had no destination in mind, but he had definitely decided to leave.

He came out to the walk and started for the stables. A big, important-looking man in fawn-colored riding britches rode in, flanked by two hard-bitten riders that brought a frown to Steve's face. The big man parted from his companions further up the street and came riding past Steve and turned in to the rack just ahead. He dismounted and came up to the walk and brushed past Steve, a heavy, florrid man too important to be polite to strangers. He went into an office that had: CLAYTON ROSS, ATTORNEY AT LAW, across the window.

Steve walked past. Three doors down a tall, dour-faced man with big hands and feet stood in the doorway of his dry goods store. Steve nodded. "Howdy, Higgens," and Higgens bobbed his head in acknowledgement, a red flush darkening his face. He was Peggy Higgens' father, and Steve paused. "Heard Peggy's married."

Higgens mumbled: "Yes, she's living in Benbow, now," and turned abruptly, disappearing inside his store. Steve stiffened. He knew Higgens as an inarticulate man, but, damn it, what was biting him? He remembered Carl's reactions when he had mentioned Peggy. What was there about Peggy that even her father should react so strangely?

He looked out across the sun-beaten street, and disgust rose to taunt him. *All right, it said—you've come back! Satisfied?*

He stretched his legs to get to Wyatt's stables.

The pasty-faced hostler watched him saddle the piebald. "You're Steve Corris?" he said, and Steve grinned sourly at the note of awe in the boy's voice.

"What's it like in El Paso?" the boy asked. There was a light in the boy's eyes that Steve remembered. It had been in his eyes five years ago.

"Some day I'm gonna shake this town," the said said rebelliously. "There's nothin' doin' here!"

Steve grinned. "Luck on the trail," he said, and swung the piebald away.

MELINA DAVIS was worried. She sat beside her father on the spring wagon seat, and she could tell by the thin line of his lips that her father was headed for trouble.

They arrived at Sundown just before noon, and a faint warning roused her as she noticed Bollinger talking to Clayton Ross in the doorway of Ross' law office. Her father didn't even glance at them. But Clay looked up as they drove past, and she felt the sharpness of his glance. Bollinger gave them a slow, insolent look. Melina's face felt hot.

John Davis swung his team in toward the walk and tied up at an open space along the crowded racks. "I'll see you at the hotel at two, Melina," he said. She watched him head for the Four Palms and she felt helpless and a little frightened.

Two men in dusty range clothes came out of the Ace of Clubs directly across the street from the Four Palms. They were Double Rail men and they openly wore their guns in holsters thonged down on their hips. They watched John Davis push through the Four Palms doors with close-lidded interest.

Melina shivered. Sundown had an element of tension this day, of violence that hung suspended by the uneasy thread of a man's greed.

She turned away. Coming to town today had not been her idea, but John Davis had hitched up the team, and Melina, at the last moment, had decided to accompany him.

A rider came out of the stable yard by Johnson's Warehouse and turned up the street toward her. Melina stopped. She felt cold and yet flushed, confused and frustrated and hating, and she despised herself that this man could still do that to her,

Steve saw her. He reined in sharply and dismounted, stepping quickly up to the walk in front of her. Close up now she could see the strain about his mouth, a grim seriousness in his eyes.

"I was about to ride out to the Boxed D to say good-bye," he said.

"I'm glad I saved you the trouble," Melina replied coldly. "Good day, Mr. Corris."

A stubbornness crept into the angle of his lean jaw. "I have no intention of forcing my presence on you, Miss Davis. But I am curious. We were good friends before I left Sundown. What have I done since then?"

"I assure you, Mr. Corris, that what you did away from Sundown doesn't interest me in the least. I'm sorry if I appear abrupt." She started to step past him, but he put out a blocking arm.

"Sundown changed," he said harshly. "But that didn't surprise me. But you've changed, too, and somehow that hurts. Lying doesn't become you, Melina. When I knew you, you spoke your mind. I guess that's what I remembered most about you. Even when I no longer had a clear picture of how you looked, I remembered that you were different from the other girls in our group. I remembered your steadiness. . . ."

"How touching," Melina said, and she felt the sneer on her lips. "In all those five years you thought only of me. Never of Peggy Higgens?"

He frowned. "Sure, I thought of Peggy Higgens sometimes. But not in the same way."

Melina laughed bitterly. She felt taut and flushed, and she knew, though he kept discreetly out of sight, that Peggy's father was listening from the doorway of his store.

"I think it would have been better if you had thought of Peggy a little more often. It's several years too late now, isn't it?"

Steve stiffened. "Too late for what?" he snapped. He put his hand on her shoulder. "What about Peggy Higgens?"

There were footsteps behind her. Clayton Ross' sharp features loomed up. "Melina," he intruded. "I want to talk to you."

Steve shouldered him aside. His lean face was drawn tight against his high cheeks. "What about Peggy Higgens?" he repeated harshly.

Melina stepped past him and put her arm out to Ross, who was standing with an uncertain frown. "Good day, Mr. Corris," she flung back curtly.

Steve let his hands drop to his sides, balled his fists helplessly, then turned sharply off the walk. He got into saddle and jerked the piebald's head around in a savage, unthinking gesture.

Down the street Abe Jenkins and John Davis pushed through the doors of the Four Palms. Jenkins was drunk. His voice carried up the street, thin and strident. "I'm gonna start packin' a gun again, John. Ain't had use for it for fifteen years. But no range-hungry hog is gonna crowd me out of Sundown. You can sell out if you want, but, me, I'm stayin'!"

Melina had turned at the first sound of his voice. She had a sudden numbing sense of impending violence, sharpened by the sight of the two Double Rail gunmen lounging on the Ace of Clubs steps. They had come alert as her father and Jenkins appeared.

Desperately Melina looked for Carl Sillman, but the deputy was nowhere in sight.

Beside her Ross said with relish: "The drunken fool's asking to get hurt." He took her arm possessively. "Come into my office, Melina. I want you to reconsider. . . ."

She pulled away from him, too concerned with her father's danger to even reply. Davis was trying to shut Jenkins up, but the bitter old man was beyond caution.

"Look at 'em!" he shouted, wagging a finger at the Double Rail men. "Just waitin' to run us out! All of us! They're newcomers to Sundown, but already they walk around like they own the valley. Damn

their swaggerin' bullyin' way—I'd like to—"

Davis' sharp voice carried up the street. "Damn it, Abe, shut up!"

There was a difference of twenty years in the two Double Rail gunmen coming slowly down the saloon steps. The older man said sharply: "You accusin' us of somethin', Jenkins?"

Melina was rigid. She heard Ross suck in his breath sharply, heard his barely audible whisper: "So that's what Bollinger had in mind."

THE scene down the street seemed suddenly unreal to Melina. The Double Rail men came on at a menacing shuffle; but they stopped as a slim figure astride a piebald reined in by them. The older Double Rail gunnie's shoulders gave a queer jerk.

The hot, sun-bright stillness seemed to act as a perfect conductor of voices. Clearly Melina heard Steve's quiet voice. "I see you've changed your stamping grounds, Harvey."

The gaunt, round-shouldered man looked up. He held Steve's glance, dropped his eyes to Steve's gunless hip. He seemed to consider this a long moment. Then he shifted his glance to Frank Bollinger, still standing in front of Clayton Ross' office.

Steve's voice carried an iron suggestion. "I don't think you'll like it here, Harvey. Sundown ain't the kind of place you'd like. Nor your friend either, from the looks of him."

The younger man scowled and his hand drew his gun half out of the holster. "Just who in hell are you?" he demanded insolently.

Harvey laid a hand on his companion's arm. "This your stamping ground, Steve?" he asked nervously.

Steve nodded slightly.

Harvey drew a deep breath. He glanced again at Bollinger who was frowning. "I was gettin' itchy-footed," he said quietly. "I think we'll ride. In the morning?" It was a question.

Steve nodded. "Fair enough. In the morning, then."

He remained in saddle, waiting while Harvey pulled the younger, puzzled man back into the saloon. Then he dismounted. Jenkins had sobered somewhat.

"I wouldn't start packing a gun, Abe," Steve advised flatly. "Let the law handle

Could anything—or anyone—bring a spark of human warmth to iron-jawed John Winslow, whose only friend was the cold steel .45 that rode his hip?

Steve Frazee's

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your trouble." He turned to Davis. "See you sometime, John." He got back in saddle and rode out of town, without looking back once.

The tension ebbed out of Melina, leaving her momentarily weak-kneed. Ross was still staring after Steve. From the dry goods doorway Lemuel Higgens called to her. "Melina, come here, girl."

She turned, puzzled. He was standing in the doorway, a bony, uncomfortable, inarticulate man. "There's something I must tell you," he said. His voice was tense, strained.

She followed him inside. She smelled bolts of cloth in the semi-darkness of this narrow, cramped store, and she found herself wondering why so big and clumsy a man should have chosen such an inappropriate business.

What had been weighing on this man's mind came blurting out, with no preamble. "I should have told you before, Melina. But I didn't think he'd ever come back to Sundown. And it was better, easier to let you and all the valley folk think Steve was the cause of Peggy's shame!"

Melina felt the hot blood in her cheeks. "Lem! Whatever are you saying? What do you mean?"

Higgens' voice labored. "I wanted to kill her when I found out! But she was . . . my daughter. And she told me the truth. She told me who was the father of her child!"

Melina waited, shocked into silence. Pityingly she waited, while this stern, terribly ashamed man stumbled to find the right words.

"But it's been five years, Melina. And Peggy married the man who was the father of her child. That's what I wanted to tell you. Things turned out all right. She's living in Benbow with the man she married—the man I . . ." he faltered.

Melina's voice was small. "But why? Why did Peggy tell me what she did? Why did— "

"I know because I made her tell me," Higgens said harshly. "She always wanted Steve. She wanted to hurt him, to hurt you, too. She said you . . . you thought a lot of him."

Melina turned away. She stopped in the doorway to look back at the big, broken, sad man who had shown a greater courage than she would have ever believed him capable of.

She said softly, humbly: "Thank you, Lemuel."

Then she was out on the walk and hurrying toward the wagon. Her father saw her as she climbed up into the seat and took the reins.

"Wait a moment, Melina . . ."

She ignored him. She swung the team sharply around and drove past him, barely aware of his stunned surprise, barely aware of anything. . . .

She overtook Steve on the bluff above the river, two miles out of Sundown. He had pulled off the trail and was looking down the length of the valley, and she saw the controlled surprise in his eyes as she drove up.

All the way from town she had tried to decide the words she would use, how she would explain it.

But now she sat numbly on the seat, looking into his face, knowing how she had hurt him, and understanding the guarded appraisal.

"Steve," she said. "Come back, Steve. Sundown needs you—and I need you. I need you, Steve!"

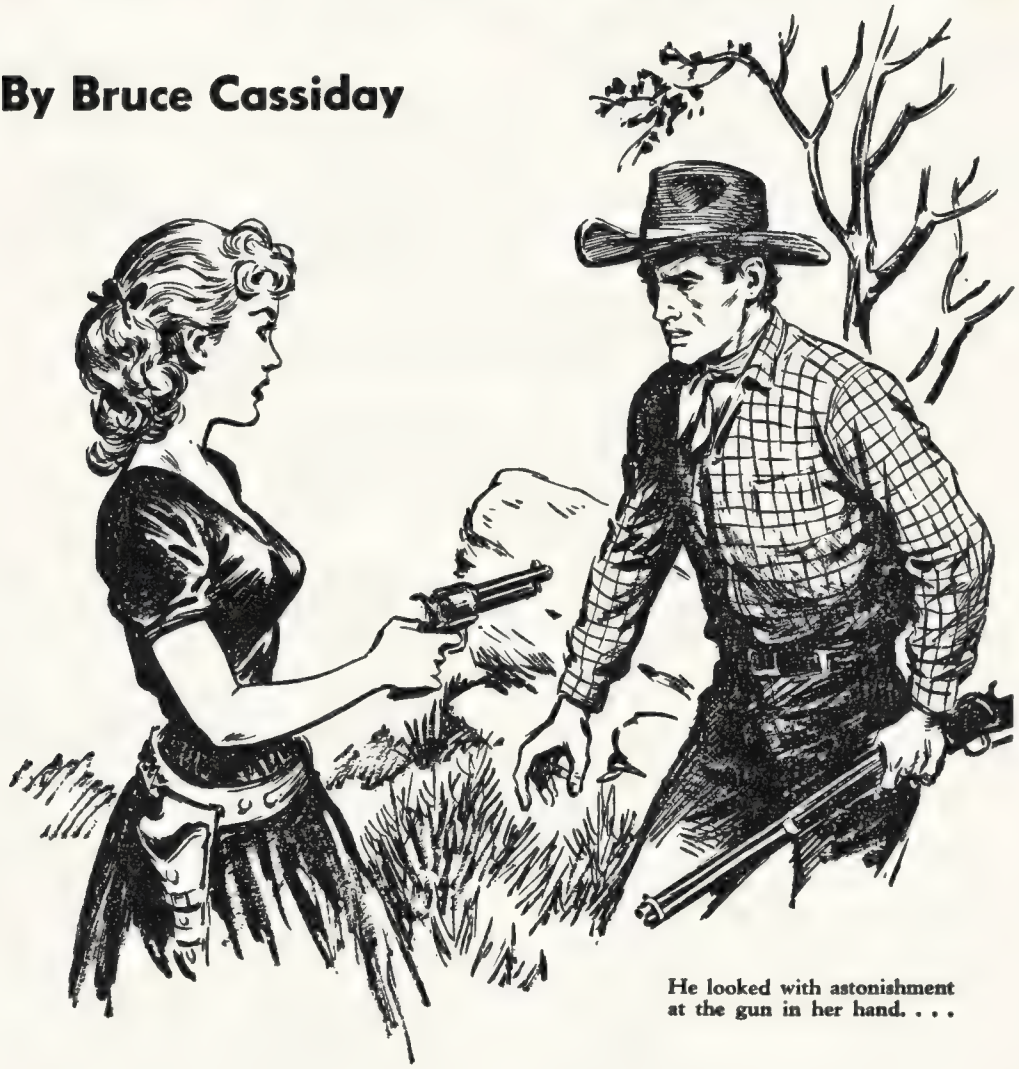
For a moment he held back, his eyes searching her face. Then the hard barrier this man had built up crumbled, and he rode to her. She stood up in the seat and came into his arms, feeling the yearning in this man.

There would be time, later, to tell him about Peggy—to explain why she had hurt him.

Now it was enough that Steve Corris had come home! ★ ★ ★

Sooner Spitfire

By Bruce Cassiday



He looked with astonishment at the gun in her hand. . . .

When a determined Texas spitfire like Judy stakes her claim—either on the lush land of the Strip, or on the hard heart of a woman-hating hombre — it's high time to get inside and bar the door!

THERE lay his dream in the Oklahoma moonlight, a hundred and sixty acres of rolling red top, dotted with trees and watered by a twisting stream—his for the taking. The temptation grew in him to stay in the ravine until tomorrow noon when the Cherokee Strip would be opened for settlement. But there would be a sour taste to his dream if he came by it in

the manner of a sooner that would ruin it.

Mark Adams cast one last glance at the quarter section he meant to stake out, and headed his horse for the Hennessey line once again. Suddenly the hair along the nape of his neck bristled. Not a hundred yards away, illuminated in the bright yellow aura of a burning match, sat a U.S. trooper astride his horse, lighting a cigarette.

Adams swung his horse around and made for a clump of cottonwoods by the twisting stream. Behind them, his shape would not silhouette against the dark backdrop of the night. He peered intently through the shimmering leaves of the cottonwood, and he was frightened when he saw that the trooper was pausing on the rise to enjoy his smoke.

Silently, Adams slid out of the saddle and tied his horse to a cottonwood. Then he made his way carefully down the gentle slope to the creek. He could hear the stream flowing unevenly and weakly, for this was the height of the dry season. As he made for a cluster of greasewood growing by the creek, Mark Adams thought with surprised pride: *Why, this is my stream—if I can beat out the hungry pack.*

Then he heard a soft, clear voice speaking out of the darkness in front of him. "Don't make any noise, mister." It was a woman's voice, not at all excited, and full of command.

He tensed, yet had the good sense not to go for his gun. Confronting him was an armed girl, dressed in black homespun, with a ribbon in her hair. Her eyes, bright in the moonlight, looked at him questioningly, and her brows were drawn in a frown of concentration.

After she looked him over, she slid her gun back into its holster buckled around her waist. "It's about time you noticed that trooper. I thought you'd get us both caught. You have a mighty careless way about you, prowling around this land." She spoke as if she were lecturing a child. Mark Adams felt a momentary flare of resentment, but that died, and he frowned at the girl.

He had seen this girl before—yesterday at the registration booth in Hennessey. She had been alone, alone and on foot, standing in line with the rest of the homesteaders: the miners, the farmers, the cattlemen, the gamblers. But there were other women there, clothed in dark black dresses, bonnetted against the strong sun, and it was not because she was a woman that he had noticed her.

It was rather the air of challenge and stubbornness in her pretty face; the way she wore that blue ribbon in her yellow hair; the manner in which she stared back at each man who gazed at her. When she had flung her bold and steady glance at Mark Adams, he felt the heat rise in his face, and he was stirred by a strange excitement. He had busied himself studying the rigs parked up and down the street: the covered wagons, buckboards, and sulkies. But wherever he looked afterward he could see the pretty, freckled face of the lone girl signing up for the Cherokee Strip Run, the biggest horse race in history.

"I didn't know sooners came in skirts," he said now. "What's your name?"

She frowned slightly. "Judy Harmon. And I'm no sooner."

"You look like one, hiding on my land," he said evenly.

Tiny lines creased her forehead. "*Your* land? I didn't know this section belonged to anybody. Unless, of course, you're a sooner yourself."

"It'll be my land tomorrow." His voice hardened. "And I'm no sooner. I just believe in finding out what I'm getting into. Now you'd better tell me why you're here."

"I rode out to find the easiest way to get here. My father picked out this section a long time ago, when he punched cattle on the Strip."

"Land-rushing is a man's game," Mark Adams said roughly. "Why isn't your father here?"

Her shoulders straightened, and so did

the line of her mouth. "Dad died on the way here from Texas. I promised to make the run for him."

"That's no reason for a woman to run. It'll be no lady's day. Why don't you go on back to Texas?" His voice sounded like chipped granite. It was impossible to fight the stubbornness that rose in him when he talked to her.

"There's no humanity left in you, is there?" She looked away from him, letting her eyes stare out into the darkness. "Don't you understand?" she asked softly. "I'm doing what my father wanted to do all his life."

"I want this land, Miss Harmon," he said stiffly. "I'd better warn you, I intend to get it. And no mere woman can stop me."

Her eyes came back to his face. They traveled over him almost pityingly, and then she smiled a far-away, sad smile. "There's a devil working on you. It's land-hunger, Mr. Adams. I've seen it destroy better men than you. There are other things in the world besides real estate."

"Not for me—until I get it. Land is a man's dream—a dream that needs fulfilling. You're a woman. You wouldn't understand," he said with mild contempt.

"You have an obsession," she told him quietly. "There's no use trying to reason with you."

For a moment Mark Adams looked at the girl, and then he walked carefully along the creek bank. He glanced up through the cottonwood trees. The trooper had finished his cigarette and was loping off to the east. Mark Adams turned and walked back. He stopped a moment and looked down at Judy Harmon.

"The trooper's gone. You and I will ride to the line together."

From the darkness came: "You don't trust me?"

"I trust no woman, for none ever deserved trust." He waited while the girl untied her mare from a greasewood and led her into the open. Judy Harmon was watching him closely, almost as if she were trying to pry inside him and examine his feelings.

"You'll find that women are something like claims of land, Mr. Adams," she said softly. "They are what each man makes them. Did you ever try to prove one up?"

They had reached the cottonwood, and Adams climbed into the saddle of his horse. "I've had good luck with horses. Why should I change my occupation now?" His face was stern.

She moved gracefully into the saddle. "Whatever gave you the idea I intended you should? I merely asked." She sped her horse out in front of his. In a moment they were riding swiftly through the cover of darkness for the Hennessey line. . . .

THE wagons and tents and tethered horses made a sharp hulking outline against the night sky. Behind the jagged line-up of vehicles and animals, campfires blazed, and somewhere a cowhand sang a song to the accompaniment of a soft-toned guitar.

Where do you come from, where do you go?
Where do you come from, Cotton-Eye Joe?
Come for to see, come for to sing;
Come for to show you my diamond ring.

In the distance a man's voice boomed out in laughter, and nearby a horse nickered. Mark Adams stood in the ring of a campfire circle watching a game of stud poker. A soft breeze stirred the air, and someone said: "By golly, you think it's goin' to rain tomorrow?"

"On the Big Day? Why, it dassn't!" a voice observed blandly.

Adams felt a slight stir behind him, and a light hand touched his shoulder. He turned. It was Judy Harmon. In the firelight her blue eyes were bright and clear, and the glow in her cheeks was deep and warm.

"I couldn't help but see you standing here in the light. Do you mind? I don't

know a soul elsewhere in the camp."

He considered. "I don't mind. Would you like to walk about?"

She nodded her head. "Yes."

They walked away from the campfire, moving slowly over the red Oklahoma soil. When they were some distance from the firelight, they stopped and stood looking out over the rolling prairieland to the west.

"It's a big land," she said with a touch of awe in her voice. "Hundreds of acres of the best farmland in the world." She did not look at him, and he was aware that she expected him to follow up her statement. But that would turn the conversation back to that particular quarter section, and he had not come out here to talk about that.

He laughed harshly. "The frontier is no place for a woman. You should be in a nice quiet house on a nice quiet street in a nice quiet Eastern town—not out here."

She looked at him. "You have a great contempt for women, Mr. Adams. Yet, they can build a frontier as well as a man. And without them, there would be no frontier."

His eyes glittered, and his face was hard. "You can't trust them. They never keep their word." The venom of his hatred hung in the air.

She said, "You speak of a quiet Eastern town. Why did you leave that to come out here?"

He laughed flatly. "I was born with the coal dust of Pennsylvania in my teeth. I came here for the fresh air. What's more, I like it. Here I can have land, and farm it. Back there we ripped it to pieces with picks and shovels." He whispered: "Desecration."

She let him think about it a moment. "You're quite bitter."

For a long time he said nothing. Then, "I had nothing. I worked all day under thousands of tons of solid rock. I slept all night in a room with six other people. We lived in a company shack. I wore company clothes. I ate company food." Mark Adams smiled and turned to look at Judy Harmon. "You can't understand how it is to have nothing of your own."

Her eyes were alert. "There was a girl, then?"

Mark Adams nodded, his eyes looking out into the vast space. "She promised me she'd wait, but she didn't mean it. I had nothing to offer her."

The voice of the guitar player carried to them through the cool Oklahoma air.

I have led a good life, full of peace and quiet. I shall have an old age, full of rum and riot.

Judy Harmon sighed. "Do you want the land for her?"

Mark Adams let out a harsh laugh. "No. Just for me. She married a drummer from Kansas City." His voice tightened. "Land is something that stays true to you, no matter who you are."

"There are thousands of acres besides that one quarter section, Mr. Adams," Judy Harmon said tentatively.

He asked, quietly, "What are you trying to say to me?"

Her expression became coquettish. "You wouldn't think of being a gentleman and letting me win that race tomorrow, would you?"

He saw her face in the moonlight, and his own expression turned stony. "I guess you've been laughing at me. A gentleman would never let an opportunity like this slip by him, would he? Alone on a million acres of prairie with a beautiful girl like you?"

A shocked look came into her eyes. She said nothing, turned and walked stiffly away.

Who wouldn't promise her he'd pass up the best quarter section on the Cherokee Strip? Isn't that the reason he'd been brought out here—to get that land away from him the only way she knew how?

He stalked after her, overtaking her. His hand caught her shoulder. He was trembling with fury, and when he spun her

around, he saw with shock that she was too. She faced him angrily, her eyes bright, her whole body shaking.

"Leave me alone, Mr. Adams. Nothing so lowdown occurred to me. You made it up in your ugly mind."

"I bet!" he snapped.

"Get your hands off me!" she cried, shaking her shoulders loose. "If you come one step nearer me, I'll have the whole Hennessey line on you. Good night, Mr. Adams!"

She flung herself into the darkness and disappeared in the direction of the campfire. He could hear the rising voice of the singing guitar player:

I'll get another one prettier'n you—Skip to my Lou, my darling. . . .

DAWN brought the smell of campfires and coffee brewing. The horses, sensing something unusual in the wind, turned skittish. Mark Adams crawled out of his pup tent. He built himself a fire of greasewood and heated up a can of coffee. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Judy Harmon puttering around her horse, checking the mare over for the run.

He made no attempt to catch her eye, and she did not once glance in his direction.

The sun mounted in the sky, and the subdued air of expectancy changed to bustle and activity. Mark Adams walked back to his horse, checking the saddle and the horse's hoofs; and then he folded his tent and possessions in his saddlebag. Men around him were gathered in excited groups, laughing and talking swiftly, pretending that this was not the biggest day in their lives.

When he strolled over to find Judy Harmon, he could not locate her, and so he walked back to his horse and sat down on the prairie grass. There was not much else to do in these last few hours but wait, and think, and hope.

Adams looked out past his horse at the rolling terrain of the Cherokee Strip. Patches of grass had been torn up or trampled close to the line, and off to the left ran a wide back of rutted, uneven ground extending due north, clean to Abilene, Kansas. This was the Chisholm Trail, the greatest of the old cattle trails, and it would be along the Chisholm Trail that riders would get their best start in this gigantic race. Like a huge ribbon of dry earth, the Trail stretched across the grassland, two or three hundred yards wide in spots.

A trooper passed along the line on a hammer-head roan, nodding to the men and women camped there. He tipped his hand to his hat in answer to Mark Adams' nod. Then he loped on to the left, keeping his tall, erect cavalry seat.

A card game started in back of Mark Adams, but he did not join it. He took out his father's old stem-winder to check the time once and found that it was eleven thirty. The jokes and the laughter and the horseplay abruptly died down. Men were checking over their teams, looking under wagons, pulling at straps and buckles. A deadly seriousness pervaded the atmosphere that had been recently so light-hearted.

At a quarter to noon, Mark Adams followed the lead of several of his more nervous neighbors and climbed in the saddle of his horse. No one said anything. The tension in the air was a monstrous thing, like the atmosphere before a thunder storm, like the feel in the wind before a tornado. The trooper galloped past them again.

A young boy's horse broke loose and dashed out into the beaten-down sod of the Chisholm Trail. The wind flung back the sound of the boy's cussing and screaming. No one laughed. The boy got his pony under control and brought him back. His face was red with embarrassment and shame. He was perspiring freely. The dust he had kicked up settled down. The line tightened.

It was seven minutes to twelve. The tension in Mark Adams' body ran through to his horse. The animal stepped back and forth, wound tight as the mainspring of a

watch. Adams kept a firm steady hand on the reins, and the horse quieted. They both stood there ready and waiting.

A man cleared his throat. Somewhere a dog barked, and the sudden harshness of the sound on the still air was an eerie, strange thing. Harness leather creaked, a wheel moved, a woman coughed.

And then it came—without warning—at five minutes to noon. A shot cracked out, and immediately the whole line broke with a yell and a roar. Mark Adams' horse charged ahead, for there was no keeping him back.

"It ain't time!" an anguished voice called out.

"Too damned late to worry about that!" shouted another.

In a swirl of dust the fifteen thousand waiting men along the Hennessey line charged out into the Cherokee Strip. There was no turning the line back now, even though the start was five minutes early. The troopers waved their hats and rode about, but no one did anything.

As soon as Mark Adams saw that the line would not be turned back, he edged his horse ahead into the blinding cloud of dust. The massed-in group of drivers ahead of him were following the dusty Chisholm Trail. Beside him a buckboard bounced and careened along, working up to an early collapse. Mark Adams spurred his horse and passed the buckboard. As he did so, dust boiled up around him, and he could see nothing.

A spring wagon cut across in front of him, from the right, and Adams let out a yell, but then he saw that the wagon was driverless. The spring wagon traveled straight as an arrow for the side of a sulky to his left, and the two vehicles collided and exploded in a mass of splinters and wheels and metal. A man screamed. Mark Adams saw him sprawl out on the ground, his clothes torn, flapping and bloody.

Adams emerged from the great cloud of dust now and saw several score of riders pounding along beside him. Every one of them was headed straight along the wide stretch of the Chisholm Trail, directly north for the town of Enid, the prize spot of the Cherokee Strip.

And then, to his right, he saw Judy Harmon. She was driving her bay mare for all she was worth, riding like the devil. She saw him and did not smile. Instead, she bent over her horse like a jockey and spurred her on harder.

Mark Adams moved over closer. She was riding the edge of the trampled grass. The prairie suddenly turned rolling, and her horse went up over a ground swell with a slight break in rhythm. Adams moved his own horse on beside hers.

She turned, looked at him wildly—for he was nosing her out—and pushed her horse ahead. In order to draw out in front of him, she foolishly pulled her horse off into the grass. The moment the bay mare hit the grass, she lost her timing and stumbled. The girl screamed, but gave the mare her head. Though the horse was a seasoned mount, the sod under the grass was sandy and tricky, and she broke rhythm and slewed grotesquely to get her balance. Judy Harmon went over her head onto the grass.

Mark Adams pulled up and looked back, a sudden, unreasonable panic in him. "You all right?" he shouted to the girl, his voice hoarse and shaky. She pulled herself to her feet and glared at him in rage, frustration, and helplessness. She was unhurt; that much was evident. Relief surged through him, and he laughed, turned, and sped on, leaving her standing there with her hands on her hips.

FOURTEEN miles from the Hennessey starting line, he edged over to the far side of the Trail, and then headed into the grass. He crossed the Rock Island railroad track and the bed of a dry creek. His horse barely made the far slope.

It was not far from here that he had seen the trooper and Judy Harmon last night.

It was not far from here that his quarter section lay. He urged his horse on, galloping through the sandy, orange soil. Trees sprang into sight, and then he raced down the slope to the cottonwoods. In an instant he was in the creek bed near the greasewood, over the trickle of water, and up the far bank. His horse scrambled and puffed and blew, and Mark Adams found himself on his dream—the quarter section of his choice.

From here he could see the stream curling through his land; he could see the cottonwoods and the alders. Along the surface of the rise lay good fertile red top. Behind him he heard the whoop of another rider, and, turning, he saw that there were a dozen riders already beating along toward him.

He leaped out of the saddle and set his stake in the middle of the red top. He glanced at his watch. It was 12:50.

And then he did a strange thing. He hunkered down on the grass and touched it with the palms of his hands, caressing it lovingly. Emotion choked him, and he was unashamed at the tears in his eyes.

He walked back to the rim of the creek bank and lit a cigarette. And that was where she surprised him. She appeared suddenly, pushing her horse up the slope in a flurry of sand and dust.

Without a word Judy Harmon passed him by, jumped out of the saddle, and turned to face him. Her horse wandered off in the grass. "You finally made it," he said.

"No thanks to you," she snapped, glaring at him. "The least you could do was help a lady in distress."

"Had a lot on my mind today," Mark Adams said. "I'd do anything for you now."

She turned from him and walked over to his pup tent. "I see you're planning to stay."

"I sure am."

She was walking toward one of the alders at the north end of the pasture. "Come over here. I want to show you something." She was bending over in the grass, brushing the blades aside. "Here it is," she said finally, "Mr. Adams."

He saw what she was looking at, and he crossed the field angrily. It was a stake, pounded securely in the ground, hidden by the grass.

Mark Adams looked at it, and then he looked at her. She saw the cords of his neck bulge out. He said, "That's why you came out here last night—not to look the place over, but to sooner my claim!"

She glared up at him, her blue eyes level and cold. "Of course I soonered it. What chance does a girl have in a man's race like this?" She shifted her gun belt and put her hands on her hips. "But you can't prove it."

Adams bit his lip. "A lowdown dirty trick, Miss Harmon."

She smiled. There was no softness in it. "But an effective one." Then her eyes did soften, and interest showed there. "How do you intend to deal with me?"

"I'm damned if I know." Mark Adams stared levelly at the girl's face, and hefted his rifle. "I'd hate to think of using the lead cure."

She laughed, openly, showing her teeth. "You wouldn't dare!"

His eyes narrowed. "And if *I* don't leave, Miss Harmon, what do *you* intend to do?"

She braced herself, lifted her chin defiantly, her eyes almost amused. "I'll have you hanged for a claim-jumper."

He said after a short pause, "If you're doing this for your father, I don't think he'd approve. A man cherishes a dream for a long time, and when he comes by it, there is a fine feeling in the achievement. But making a dream come true this way sours it."

UNTIL now she had been cool and sure of herself. It was almost as if she had been playing with him, taunting him into some rash action. But at the mention of

her father, the blood left her cheeks, and her eyes went wild. Whatever she had planned was forgotten now. Her mouth twisted.

"Get off my land, Mr. Adams. Right away. Pack up your pup tent and vamoose."

His eyes studied her, a smile flickering in them. He saw that he had destroyed her line of attack. Almost with contempt he shook his head and turned away. "No."

"Mr. Adams!" Her voice trembled with emotion. He faced her again, a sardonic smile on his lips. She was reduced to fury, he could see that by her eyes, and whatever advantage she had gained was lost now. He started to speak, and his eyes dropped with astonishment to the gun in her hand. He was staring down its dark barrel.

Her image vanished from his sight. The memory of her was gone. What remained was simply the sight of that gun barrel. And, of course, there was the fact that his land was being taken away. That was of immediate, vital interest. He lifted the rifle in an awkward arc and fired.

His bullet zipped into the red top, and instantly he felt the force of her bullet slam into his shoulder and spin him completely around. He staggered a moment, tried to take a breath into his burning chest, and stumbled down into the soft red earth. The rifle clattered to the ground, out of reach.

Shakily, Mark Adams pulled himself up onto his left elbow, his right shoulder bloody and throbbing painfully. He saw her coming haltingly over to him, holding the smoking gun in her hand, her eyes wide with horror.

"Finish up the job," he said bitterly, looking at her with hate in his eyes. "Why don't you finish up the job?"

"I had to do it," she said in a stunned whisper. "You would have shot me if I hadn't."

"You've gotten your land the rotten way. I forgive your father his fine dream. You'd better kill me. If you don't, I'll win the land back somehow."

Thrusting her gun into the holster at her belt, she knelt and pulled him into a sitting position. "Have you a handkerchief?" He nodded wearily. She ripped the bloody shirt sleeve off, and bound the wound with the handkerchief. "I'll get you to Hennessey and a doctor."

"Don't help me or I'll be back," he whispered. "Nobody can take my land."

She stood abruptly, letting him fall back, her eyes tear-streaked and violent. "I don't want the land. Not now," she cried, her voice high-pitched and wild. "I did last night when I set that stake, but I don't now."

He stared at her dumbly. "What made you change your mind?"

"I don't really know," she said tearfully. "Maybe you. Maybe seeing you lying there hurt. I can't be sure." Her voice trailed off, her eyes misted again.

"What about your father?" Mark Adams persisted.

She breathed in softly, staring into the distance at the miles of red rolling prairie. "The memory of my father made me change. Two men should not die because they each dreamed of a quarter section of red top." She sat down beside him abruptly. "Give me your arm. I want to be sure that bandage is right."

Mark Adams gave her his arm and looked her squarely in the eye. "Do you relinquish all claim to this land?"

She bit her lip, her eyes on his bandage. "Yes."

He sighed, relaxing. "I now have a quarter section of land. And a dream of fixing it up. I lack one thing only. A wife to share it. Will you be her?"

She gazed down at her hands, a sudden flush in her cheeks. "We'd better go now," she said. "I'll get you to a doctor."

He rose and stood looking at her anxiously, wondering if he had made a complete fool of himself.

She smiled. "And then we'd better file *our* claim." ★ ★ ★

"Now it's your turn to hold 'em up, tough man! One false move, and you're dead as all hell!"

LADY HELLCATS ON THE LOOSE

By John T. Lynch

(A Factual Drama)

Towns weren't wild enough, and jails weren't strong enough to hold Calamity Jane and her four female protegés!

THE Sheriff of Denver, in 1874, was a busy man. The local miners, cowhands, cattlemen, along with more than a normal share of the West's horse thieves, cattle rustlers and assorted other criminals, gave him trouble enough. He was damned if he was going to let outsiders contribute to the general hell of the city. For this reason, Sheriff Bert Carle kept a

close watch on strangers and faithfully checked new arrivals at the three hotels.

A veteran lawman who had lived long in the West, Carle knew, by sight, as well as reputation, every noted gunman and trouble maker from Abilene to the California coast. Thus, unwanted travelers were quickly recognized, and as quickly given notice to depart.

One sunny afternoon, during a routine check of the Denver Hotel's register, Sheriff Carle found only one new name. "This the only arrival today?" he asked the clerk, pointing to the daintily-written name, *Miss Mary Clayton, Boston, Mass.*

"Yeah," answered the clerk. "Very refined young lady. Quiet and reserved. Can't tell how pretty she is, though, because she didn't raise her veil, but . . . Well, you can see her for yourself. I saw her go into the dining room a little while ago."

"How pretty she is, or ain't, might interest you. But it's got nothing to do with it. Point is, this ain't no town for a cultured, young lady from the East to be alone in." He frowned. "Probably one of them school teachers, on vacation, who wants to see if the West is like they been readin' about in them lyin' newspapers back in Boston."

The sheriff made his way to the dining room, which adjoined the small hotel lobby. The supper crowd had not yet arrived. Seated alone, the young lady at the corner table was holding up the lower part of her heavy pink veil with one hand, and bringing up small spoonfuls of soup to her mouth with the other. When she saw the sheriff approaching, she dropped the veil, put down the spoon, and demurely lowered her head.

As he walked toward her, Sheriff Carle, with his quick eye for details, noted that the fair visitor would be about five feet, two or three inches, standing up, and that she weighed around 120. Slender, gracefully formed, Carle surmised her age at approximately twenty-two years. Even though the veil hid her face, the sheriff realized that here, truly, was a real lady and that she would be as out of place in Denver as a lily amongst tumbleweeds.

Politely removing his hat, Sheriff Carle bowed gallantly as he reached the table. "Don't be frightened ma'am," he said. "I happen to be the sheriff here, and I want to know if you find everything to your taste. We don't have many nice young ladies visit us—"

The lawman cut his sentence short. He could hardly believe his eyes. For the demure, young lady had opened a small traveling carpet bag, brought forth an ornate case and from it extracted a long, black cigar. Lifting her veil, she bit off the end of the cigar, spit the chunk across the table, then said, "Got a match, Sheriff?"

Sheriff Carle stood transfixed. Furnishing her own match, the lady lit the cigar, took a long puff, then removed the flowery hat and the veil completely. "Well, don't stand there like a damn-fool statue," she said with a grin. "Sit down. Your knees are wobbly."

Sheriff Carle sank into the chair opposite the pretty guest. He stared at her until he could find his voice. Then he stammered, "M-M-Martha Jane Canary! C-C-Calamity Jane! What th' hell you doin' in Denver?"

"Now calm down, Sheriff," laughed Calamity Jane. "You don't need to expect any trouble. I won't be here long enough to cause any—"

Carle shook his head. "Jane, wherever you are—and no matter how long you stay —there's always trouble. I know! I've known you too long. I know you ain't called 'Calamity' for nothing! But Jane, listen. I been gettin' along fine here—so far. Now, do me a favor as an old friend—and as Wild Bill Hickok's old friend, too—and just get the hell out of Denver. I can take care of the usual gun fights, knife throwings and all-around brawls. But, when it comes to Calamity Jane . . ." The lawman

momentarily buried his face in his hands. He was a picture of utter frustration.

Calamity Jane was touched. She reached over and patted the shaggy head of her old friend. "You got me wrong, this time, Bert," she said. "Perk up and listen. I got a mission to accomplish."

"A mission to accomplish," repeated Sheriff Carle, straightened up at the reassuring words. "That sounds like something General Custer would say."

"That's right," said Jane. "I was with the General so long that sometimes I even talk like him. Oh, by the way, Wild Bill sends his regards. He had heard you were sheriff down here in Denver."

Bert Carle grinned in fond remembrance. "Good old Bill. How's everything going with you two?"

Jane smiled. "Well, we both been together a lot now that we are kind of neighbors, up in Deadwood. But I guess you know that Wild Bill ain't exactly the marryin' kind. Looks like he might go an' get himself killed before he ever asks me to be his wife. But then, who knows?"

"I heard tell that you took up with that outlaw, Jim Wall, for a time, just to get Wild Bill jealous."

"Let's change the subject," grinned Calamity Jane. "As I said, I got a mission to accomplish here in Denver. You can help me, Bert. The sooner I get what I came for, the sooner I'll get away, and the sooner you can quit worryin'."

Martha Jane Canary then explained to the sheriff that Will Swarringer, who owned the largest saloon in Deadwood, wanted several dance hall girls for his establishment. "The ones he hired were all pretty and very genteel-like. One by one, they got married off. There are a lot more dance hall girls like that up around the High Border country but the trouble is they marry and leave. So, Will sent me down here to Denver to get some girls that maybe ain't so genteel that they'll marry off too quick. You got any around here?"

Sheriff Carle mulled it over. Then he reached over and gave Calamity a friendly pat on the back. "Calamity," he said, "you just gave me an idea how to get rid of some of my worst trouble makers. You can have 'em!"

THE lawman and Jane went over to the jail. There, in one large and airy cell, Calamity was introduced to four strange ladies. One was Big Helen Black, erstwhile card-shark and crooked faro dealer. Another was Kansas City Kitty, a well known hellcat of the day who had a bad habit of shooting off a .44 at the slightest provocation. And she was an excellent marksman, too. The third was Mamie Marker, who specialized in jiu jitsu tactics while rolling would-be amorous gentlemen for their personal belongings. The fourth of the charming group of jailed females was Bowie Bertha, whose skill with the bowie knife, both in throwing and in hand carving, accounted for at least three inhabitants of the local boothill.

All of the girls were pleased to meet the famous Calamity Jane, and were happy to go up to Deadwood with her—the condition upon which Sheriff Carle would release them from jail.

Taking the sensible precaution of not permitting his charges their freedom until just prior to the time the stage would depart for points north, Sheriff Carle, with the help of two strong deputies, personally escorted Jane and her new friends to the station. With a sigh of happiness and vast relief, Sheriff Carle bade Calamity Jane a fond farewell and watched the stage until it had disappeared up the dusty road toward Cheyenne. . . .

In Cheyenne, Calamity Jane bought her recruits new outfits. She herself had been so successful in dressing tastefully and demurely in proper young ladies' clothes that she personally picked out the garments. When she was through, all five of the girls looked as if they were products of a refined

and highly exclusive Eastern finishing school.

The trip was uneventful until the five young ladies reached Laramie, Wyoming, where they learned they would have to spend an entire afternoon and night before transportation farther north would be available.

No sooner had the five women registered at the hotel than word quickly spread around the town that a party of pretty but refined Eastern debutantes was temporarily gracing Laramie. Excitement ran high, and soon a large crowd gathered to meet them. An official welcoming committee was formed by the mayor's wife, along with several other members of the more refined social set.

"There are so few of us respectable, genteel married ladies in this community," explained the mayor's wife to Calamity Jane, "that we feel it our duty to take you and your four charming charges under our wings during your short stay here. We must admit that Laramie is an uncouth place, but, thank heavens, we do have a few civilized people. It just wouldn't do for you young ladies to come in contact with our more rowdy element."

Politely thanking the committee for its kind and protective interest, Calamity and her girls were ushered to their rooms. Once alone, Calamity hastily gathered her four charges together.

"Before I made this trip down to Denver, Wild Bill Hickok and Mr. Swarringer—your new boss in Deadwood—were both worried that I might get into trouble if people recognized me. That's why I dressed in these fancy duds—to look like a lady, for once. Nobody bothers a real lady. I decked you girls out the same way because I wanted to get you all to Deadwood without any trouble on the way. It is working fine. As long as we are looked on as ladies, there won't be any jams. But, we got to act like ladies, too. So, here we are and here we stay, in these rooms, until time to pull out of Laramie. I don't want any of you to go to saloons or gambling joints. It ain't ladylike. Understand?"

"To hell with that," cut in Big Helen Black. "We ain't prisoners. We do as we please."

Calamity smiled. "Sure, you can do as you please, but, remember, if you go out on this town, you don't get a job in Mr. Swarringer's place in Deadwood. And, as I told you, he will pay twice as much as you ever got before for working in a dance hall. Besides, Deadwood is just full of miners with full pokes."

"You win, Calamity," said Big Helen. The other girls agreed to act like ladies, and not even enter a saloon during the entire trip.

"But, how we goin' to kill time?" asked the restless Kansas City Kitty. "Expect us to just sit here in this crummy hotel and twiddle our thumbs?"

Calamity was faced with a real problem. She was thinking deeply when a quiet knock sounded on the door. "It's the ladies committee," said the gentle voice of the mayor's wife. "We have come to invite you up to my house for an afternoon of tea and literary readings."

Calamity opened the door and greeted the elderly, prim group of Laramie social and cultural leaders. "That's mighty nice of you ladies," said Calamity. "We will be happy to join you."

"Carriages await without," said the mayor's wife.

"Without what?" asked Mamie Marker.

"Why, without, er—"

"Don't mind her," Calamity cut in, surreptitiously pinching Mamie where it hurt. "She must have her little joke."

The mayor's wife dutifully twittered and led the way to the waiting conveyances.

CALAMITY JANE felt happy and secure during the short ride to the ornate residence of the mayor, who had struck a rich vein of ore up in Virginia City, some

years ago, and hence had the only house in Laramie where the ladies' committee could really put on airs. At this harmless tea and literary reading, Calamity told herself, the girls would be far removed from the temptations which existed in other parts of the town.

But Calamity's happy frame of mind did not last long. Even though she had whispered to each of her charges to be very careful of what she said and did, on entering the house, the general air of gentle and cultured breeding did not last long. Big Helen Black, Kansas City Kitty, Mamie Marker and Bowie Bertha did their best—but it was not quite enough. They tried hard to be real ladies, but something seemed to go wrong at every turn. . . .

Seated elegantly around the large parlor, the town ladies led off in polite conversation while tea was being poured by the mayor's wife.

"Do you find the West quaint?" asked the minister's good wife, of Kansas City Kitty—who had been introduced as Miss Matilda Van Allen.

"Quaint?" mused Kansas City Kitty. "Well, yes. Sometimes I do. But it ain't th' West so much. It's th' ring-tailed skunks you meet up with! Why, would you believe it, when I shot that there cheatin' husband of mine—I forget whether it was my first or second—that damn undertaker in Cheyenne wanted me to pay all the funeral expenses, and—"

Mrs. Creel hastily excused herself and went to the kitchen to quietly have a fainting spell.

In a corner of the room, the wife of a local banker, made charming conversation with Big Helen Black.

"So, my dear," said the banker's wife, adjusting her pince-nez on her scrawny but refined nose, "you are from a Boston finishing school, aren't you?"

"Sure as hell am," answered Big Helen. "And, you know somethin'? I went there for eight years, and never did find out what it was them rannies was tryin' to finish."

The lady coughed lightly. "Um, er, yes. Quite. But, tell me, my dear, what did you major in? I mean did you have an interesting major?"

"Ma'am," answered Big Helen, "I've had not only interestin' majors, but captains, lieutenants and privates, too. But, take my advice, lady, and keep away from them army posts."

"But, that's not quite what I meant," smiled the banker's wife, just beginning to get frightened. "I meant—what was the main thing they taught you at finishing school?"

"I'd be right happy to show you, ma'am," said Helen. "Got a deck of cards?"

That lady quickly excused herself and joined the minister's wife in the kitchen.

At this point the mayor's wife called to Mamie Marker, "What will you have in your tea? Lemon or sugar."

"Neither," Mamie called back. "Just put a good stiff jolt of tiger juice in it, will you, honey?"

"Tiger juice? I don't believe I—"

Bowie Bertha overheard this repartee and took a hand. From out of a bag she carried with her, she brought forth a quart bottle of whiskey. She proffered it to the amazed hostess. "Here's some tiger juice. Put some in my tea, too. And, by the looks of you, you could stand some yourself. Here, I'll fix it." The mayor's good wife started to protest, but Bowie Bertha snatched the large tea pot from her trembling hands. Opening the lid, she dumped half the contents of her whiskey bottle into the formerly innocuous beverage.

Much to the surprise of the town ladies, Bowie Bertha did not bother with a cup. She drank deeply directly from the teapot. Then, with a sigh of contentment, she invited any lady present to a knife throwing contest. As there were no takers she said, "Well, then, does anybody want to wrestle?"

The ladies of Laramie were shocked, but

merely sat and watched, in horror and disbelief, as Kansas City Kitty grabbed the bottle from Bowie Bertha's left hand, drank deeply, then threw the bottle through the front window. The window happened to be closed at the time. Glass shattered with a resounding crash.

Calamity Jane, unaware that trouble had already started, inside, had been conversing with the mayor, out on the porch swing. When the window shattered, and the bottle came flying through it, Calamity knew it was time to take a hand. She dashed into the house just in time to see Big Helen, who resented the fact that Kansas City Kitty had thrown out the precious fluid left in the bottle, snatch up the cake knife from the tea table and throw it at Kitty's head. The blade missed by a fraction of an inch.

Calamity Jane, who was packing a .44 under her skirts, did not want to use it unless absolutely necessary. With a mighty heave she caught Big Helen by the throat and threw her to the floor. On the way down Helen crashed into a fancy, thin-legged chair, that folded and fell in small bits. One thing led to another. In a matter of moments the town ladies had hastily repaired to the safety of the front porch and the kitchen. They watched, screaming and frightened, as the fracas in the front room turned into a general free-for-all. Calamity, suddenly realizing that all was lost anyhow, waded in now, like the others—for the sheer delight of fighting. . . .

THE alarm soon spread around the town that a riot was in progress at the mayor's house. The townsfolk converged on the scene in a hurry. The lucky first arrivals took up vantage points at the windows. They watched the terrific battle royal in which the five young and genteel ladies from Boston were engaged, and reported loudly to the rest of the cheering mob.

The sheriff finally arrived on the scene and looked the hectic situation over. Through the window he watched the slugfest. Then, suddenly, as their finery and ladylike togs became torn and bedraggled, the lawman recognized the five ladies.

"I got to swear in at least ten deputies, in order to arrest them fightin' wildcats inside," he announced to the crowd. "Any volunteers?"

Many of the men expressed willingness to aid the sheriff in doing his duty. "But, I got to be fair, men," yelled the sheriff above the din coming from the inner arena. "You got to know what you are getting yourselves in for."

One of the volunteers laughed. "Hell, Sheriff. Anybody can arrest five young women."

"Yes," answered the sheriff, "under ordinary conditions. But these here ladies happen to be Calamity Jane, Big Helen Black, Kansas City Kitty, Mamie Marker and Bowie Bertha. You might not know 'em all, but every lawman sure does. Now, I repeat—any volunteers?"

This time not a man stepped forward. The sheriff had to handle the matter alone. Leaning tentatively in the window, he hollered, "Hey, Calamity! Remember me? I'm Sheriff Ed Sloane. Remember that time in Abilene I did you a favor?"

Calamity paused in her battling long enough to acknowledge the greeting. "Don't bother me now!" she yelled. "I'm busy!"

As Calamity turned her head to glance at the sheriff, Big Helen took undue advantage of the situation and hit Calamity over the head with the leg of the tea table which was now, like all other furniture in the room, broken.

Calamity Jane sank to the littered floor. Immediately the fight came to a halt. This had gone too far. Nobody was supposed to get killed. It was just a more or less friendly free-for-all. No bad blood, really.

"Hey, girls, hold it!" screamed Big Helen. "I think I went and accidentally killed Calamity."

From a scene of utter abandon and confusion, the ladies changed into a group of

kind-hearted females, solicitous for the welfare of another of their kind. Tenderly bending over Calamity, they poked and probed.

"Get a doctor, somebody," Big Helen hollered to the now quiet mob outside. "Looks like Calamity got hurt."

Calamity Jane had been stunned, but only for a few minutes. As history records, she was sturdy. "Help me up," she said, suddenly coming to. "I ain't hurt."

The sheriff came in, followed by deputies forced into service. But the trouble was over. The lady wildcats had calmed down and were good friends once more. Slowly the town ladies came back into what had been a well appointed parlor. Surveying the wreck, they wondered how five young ladies could do so much damage in such a short time. They had not heard the sheriff's identification of the girls in question.

"Calamity," the sheriff said, "I hope you won't held it against me—and don't tell Bill Hickok it was my fault, either—but I got to arrest all you girls for riotin' in th' mayor's house."

At this juncture, the mayor himself spoke up. "Now, wait a minute, Sheriff," he said, nervously. "Maybe we ought to think this over. After all, that's a nice, new jail we got; an' it was built with th' taxpayers money. I'd hate for anything to happen to that jail."

A hasty conference took place. One and all agreed that it would be better all around if the lady wildcats simply left town, pronto, and promised never to return. As a further guarantee that the five young ladies from Boston would get as far away from Laramie as possible, with the least possible delay, the town chipped in to charter a special stagecoach to take the unwanted cargo to the next stop, which was the unfortunate settlement of Lusk, Wyoming.

Although the stopover in Lusk was only for a few hours, by the time the finishing school girls had departed, the town felt as if it had been in the way of a cyclone. Calamity had made no effort to keep her charges in check. The experience in Laramie had taught her the futility of trying. . . .

Lusk's final box score, after the wildcats had breezed away, was one completely wrecked saloon—where the bartender had, at first, refused to serve ladies of quality—one broken arm, three broken legs, one concussion and several assorted bumps, bruises and black eyes distributed to would-be amorous gentlemen citizens who failed to keep a respectful distance. Also, along with a few valuable watches, the mayor's wallet was missing. So was the sheriff's badge.

FROM Lusk to Lead, South Dakota, things were rather quiet for the hell-raisers. Jogging along the dusty road in the stage, things had become downright monotonous for five such energetic individuals.

Slim Garson, up on the box, was dozing at the reins. Inside the stage the girls were amusing themselves in their own particular ways.

Big Helen Black was busily marking a few new decks of cards she had stolen in Lusk. Kansas City Kitten and Calamity Jane had their respective sixguns out and were comparing them. Mamie Marker had a length of stout twine and was practicing various hang-knots and other plain and fancy ties. Bowie Bertha had fished out her pet knife and was carving her initials on the ornate inside panel of one of the coach's doors.

It was while the ladies were thus innocently engaged, a few miles yet into Lead, that one Harvey Mackley, self-styled Badman of the Dakotas, took a notion to rob the stagecoach.

Mackley, who had been sitting on his horse atop a low rise, had watched the stage approach for a long time. He was happy to note that only a listless driver was on top, evidently unarmed. The passengers, not worth bothering about, were probably doz-

ing, also. The curtains were drawn nearly closed to keep out the dust and glare. Anyhow, passengers were nothing to worry about. They were always too scared to do anything . . . .

Badman Mackley stationed his horse behind a cluster of boulders and stepped into the road as the stage pulled abreast of him. Gun in hand, he aimed at Slim Garson's surprised head. "Hold up your hands and climb down," ordered the outlaw. As Slim quickly complied, the badman yelled to the unseen passengers inside the coach, "This is a holdup. Come out with your hands up, and nobody gets hurt!"

Through the slightly parted curtain, Calamity Jane had watched the road agent approach. She quickly whispered the crux of the situation to the other four ladies, along with explicit instructions as to what each was to do.

When his order was not immediately obeyed, Mackley snarled, "Come on out from there, you passengers—or I get rough!"

Slim, standing with arms upstretched, said, "Mister, the passengers is five nice young lady touristers, from th' East. You might scare 'em to death."

The door opened and Mamie Marker, dainty hands high, stepped demurely down. She was followed by wide-eyed Bowie Bertha, who was doing a creditable job of looking demure and frightened at the same time. And for Bowie Bertha to look demure, at any time or anyplace, was no mean feat.

Big Helen Black hesitated in the doorway, before stepping down, just long enough to block the view while Calamity and Kansas City Kitty sneaked quietly out the opposite door, on the far side of the coach.

Congratulating himself on such a helpless assemblage of victims, Badman Mackley holstered his gun and started to search the unprotesting stage driver. Busy at his task, his back was turned toward the girls.

Calamity and Kitty, each holding a six-gun, quietly stepped into view. In an extremely un-ladylike manner, Calamity yelled, "Now it's your turn to hold 'em up, tough man! One false move, and you're dead as all hell!"

The outlaw turned quickly. No damn woman was going to bluff him. . . . But when he saw both Calamity and Kitty with guns leveled at his middle, and noted that Bowie Bertha had produced a long-bladed and wicked knife, Mackley lost no time in obeying Calamity's order.

Bowie Bertha went over to him, spat in his face, and with a deft motion of the knife, cut his gunbelt in two. Weighted down by the gun in the holster, it clattered to the ground. Then, with another flip of the blade, Bertha severed the badman's pants' belt. The worn levis slipped from his middle and fell around his ankles. All of the ladies present roared with uncontrolled mirth at the sight of the bandit's long-handled drawers.

"Wonder if a road agent can dance with his pants wrapped around his feet like that?" asked Kansas City Kitty. She sent two quick shots at Mackley's feet. "Dance, badman," she said.

No outlaw was ever so humiliated as was Harvey Mackley, that day. For over an hour the ladies made him put on a show. Not only did they make him dance, but he was forced to try to stand on his head, turn a handspring, walk like a pair of ducks and promise never to rob a stagecoach again. For good measure Mamie Marker demonstrated a few choice jiujitsu throws, with Badman Mackley as the unwilling, scared victim.

Not wanting to be guilty of ever working directly on the side of law and order, the girls pondered what to do with Mackley, after the fun was over, and they felt he had learned his lesson.

Finally, Calamity said, "Oh, let's just take his pants and boots, shoo his horse

(Continued on page 111)

STAR'S PIN-UP-GIRL-OF-THE-MONTH

Here's glamorous honkatonk queen, Julie Martin, who could be an angel when loved, or a devil when crossed. To read her story, turn to page 82.

Two Hearts in Six-Shooter Time!

Moss was getting the lard pounded out of him. . . .

When a lowly nester's girl takes up squatter's rights in the heart of a cattle queen's man, that hombre had better hope that his hide is plumb bullet-proof!

CATTLE-COUNTRY ROMANCE

By Theodore J. Roemer

WITH a deep sigh of contentment, Clint Saunders pushed back from the remains of the dinner prepared by Lecia Manden. He reached a long finger into his shirt pocket for the makings.

A rough winter wind was shouldering the log walls of the ranch house, warning him that he should start back, but he ignored it and leaned back, manufacturing his smoke.

It was warm in the Bar M kitchen and pleasantly fragrant. It was pleasant, too, to watch Lecia clearing away the dishes. The thought that she was so close to his arms that, if they'd been alone, he could have pulled her onto his lap, made young Clint, who was foreman of the Leaning T, want to stay and stay.

Ed Manden's daughter was a fair-sized girl—she'd fill a man's arms—and she could cook, ride a horse, lasso a steer, or boss her old man's waddies almost as well as Ed

himself could. In other words, she was Clint's type of gal.

He sighed once more, thinking of her cherry pie, then reluctantly brought up the reason for his call.

"Tex sent me over to buy some of your hay up on the Flats, Ed. Our cattle up there need it bad. How much a ton?"

Big Ed Manden, across the table, sighed also as if regretting the fact that they had to talk business just now, then leaned slowly backward and lit his cigar stub.

"Well, now, your boss can have all he wants. There's six stacks up there, and I reckon there's ten ton to a stack," Manden drawled.

"How much you asking?"

Manden's moon-like, ruddy face grew bland. "Bard says I should get ten-fifty a ton."

Clint felt his jaw muscles harden. "Leave Bard Holloway out of this," he said. "How much?"

"Ten."

"Too steep. Eight."

"Bard says it's good hay. Twelve dollar stuff."

"Tex won't go above eight. Thought he might get it for seven—from a neighbor."

"I wouldn't sell it for ten—except to help a neighbor," Manden said, his small blue eyes expressionless.

Clint shrugged and stood up. He was a rangy, sandy-haired cowboy, a little young, maybe, to be foreman for a big spread like Leaning T, but there was a story behind that, a story that Timpkens Valley couldn't understand. Even young Clint himself never really understood why Tex Ruddard had taken him on as a hand when the sheriff in North County had cleaned out the Wild Bunch gang at Twin Forks. He'd never really belonged to the gang, but to most folks, that hadn't made a difference. The Valley folk had said Tex had hired the young gunman to root out the nester who'd taken over his prime hay land on Boston Creek.

But Tex Ruddard had never sent his young gunnie against Pete Kovis, and, after a while, Clint had hung up his guns. After he'd become foreman, the Valley gossip died, but the puzzle was still unsolved.

The Leaning T was always short of hay, but the Bar M, which lay to the south of Boston creek, always had plenty, for its holdings on the Flats up-creek were good graze and hay land. And Big Ed Manden knew that. He never sold himself short.

Clint shoved his chair back under the table, poker-faced. In that simple action, however, something came alive in his supple body. Something smouldered deep in his quiet, brown eyes as he looked at Big Ed. Then, abruptly, Clint turned away and struggled into his heavy red mackinaw.

In the process, the young foreman recalled his second reason for desiring to visit the Bar M. Lecia Manden had been inviting him with her eyes for some time. He glanced at her now, working by the stove, and knew by the way she turned her head that she'd been watching him. Clint felt his pulse move a bit faster. He walked toward the door, his spurs tinkling softly.

Ed Manden saw how things were and shifted his bulk angrily. He glanced out the window. "She's graying toward the northwest, Saunders. I wouldn't poke along if I were you."

"I'll cut across the Flats."

"Say, if you do and you see that damn'd squatter, Kovics, you tell him to keep that Holstein bull of his to home. Twice Bard and the boys had to shag him off our range. Next time we'll shoot the critter. We don't want any of that damn'd milk blood in our beef strain."

"I'll tell him, if I see him," Clint said. Stepping out the back door, he headed toward his horse.

ABSTRACTED in his thoughts, he hardly noticed Lecia creep up behind him. She smiled and Clint noticed her pretty, short-sleeved cotton dress. The blue

of her dress did things to her yellow hair. Clint grinned appreciatively. Lecia Manden was his type of girl, he thought as they entered the lean-to that served as a barn.

He wanted to kiss her there in the cool darkness. But holding back, he said, "Lecia, you'll catch cold out here."

Lecia took his hand in hers and smiled. "Don't mind Dad," she said. "He's just naturally gruff." Her hands moved up his arms a little.

Clint swallowed with difficulty. "Lecia," he murmured. "You'll catch cold out here. . . ."

"Then keep me warm," she whispered and she slid her bare arms under his open mackinaw.

His arms went around her. She felt warm and soft. In the dimness, he looked down at her yellow, fluffy hair and the pleasant curve of her shoulders, and thought how wonderously lucky he would be to have Lecia in love with him.

Lecia laughed. "Clint Saunders, is that the best you can love?" Her blue eyes twinkled and strong cheek bones showed under the smoothness of her cheeks. There was a boldness in her, born of success. Lecia Manden always got what she wanted.

Clint spoke huskily. "Lecia," he said. "I guess I'm not—" He broke off and drew her to him in a rough embrace.

Clumping boots on the lean-to stoop parted them, and they turned to see Bard Holloway approach. Seeing them, he stood stock-still, as if caught up by the impact of his surprise.

The girl spoke first. "Dad's waiting for you, Bard."

The chunky Bar M foreman nodded. His handsome face contorted, he threw a meaningful glance at Clint, and without a word, headed out to the ranch.

"Your foreman doesn't like me," Clint grinned.

Lecia's laugh was soft and challenging. "He's afraid of my man," she said. "I like strong men, Clint, and you're just about the most feared man in the whole valley."

The wind cried along the eave. Clint shivered. He looked back at this blonde, husky girl with the rounded shoulders and demanding eyes, and he thought again of Bard Holloway. The hackles on his neck slowly raised. Somehow, momentarily, it seemed he was back with the Wild Bunch where every man was an animal at bay, cagey, distrustful, ready to fight. There'd been something in Holloway's eyes that was strangely familiar.

Then the feeling left him. Lecia was with him now. She could raise the pulse of any man. . . . He brushed his lips against her cheeks and strode away. . . .

Now, the sun was a dull spot in the gray southwest sky. But a half-hour before, it had been shining brightly. Clint, riding up a climbing trail shivered, recalling Lecia's embracing arms. He buttoned his mackinaw.

He rode swiftly through the hills, heading back toward the Leaning T, but before he reached Casper's grove—a cottonwood stand by a frozen spring—the sun was gone, and the wind from the North was bitter and full of snow. He pushed his reluctant buckskin out of the grove and headed a bit westward, deciding to risk the shortcut across the Flats.

Fifteen minutes and he knew he'd made a mistake. There was six inches of snow below his buckskin's hooves and no let-up. Clint could hardly see the outline of the lessening hills now as he was approaching the Flats, but he stubbornly pushed on.

Soon, he was lost.

For an hour, Clint pushed his horse desperately, trying to guide it towards the Leaning T. He figured he should already have been across Boston creek but knew he hadn't crossed the gully with its bordering willows. Now he was somewhere on the Flats, hopelessly lost.

After a while, when his horse began to flounder in knee-deep snow, Clint dismounted. He was stiff with cold. Taking up the

reins, he tried to lead his horse but it wouldn't move. It wanted to turn tail and stand. Alternately cursing and tugging, Clint wrestled with the buckskin for five minutes before climbing into the saddle once more. He spurred the horse forward, jabbing savagely.

IT WAS growing dark, but Clint rode on despite the buckskin's attempts to turn from the wind. Clint kept yanking at the reins, trying to hold it on the course, but his movements became more difficult as feeling left his arms. Finally he gave up, and the horse turned its tail to the wind. Man and animal were completely still as the wind howled and the snow swirled down on an endless, dark prairie. . . .

Suddenly Clint started. The horse was moving! Half sleeping, and numbed with cold, Clint knew instinctively that they were moving. His knees, frozen against leather, pressed tight. Then he closed his eyes again wearily and without a guiding rein, the buckskin floundered, surged forward, moved again. Clint rode as if on a wave. He held his eyes shut. When the buckskin stopped again, Clint knew this was it. The animal was done in, and so was he. Exhausted, he slumped forward in his saddle. . . .

Voices came to him over the shriek of the wind, but Clint ignored them. He'd been fooled before; a dozen times by the devilish howls. He lay hunched over the saddle horn, unmoving. . . .

When his horse moved, Clint pried his eyelids apart, squinting. At first, he was in utter blackness, but then he saw a point of light. He shook his head, and the world came back to him.

He was inside a barn. In front of him shone a yellow lantern; not six inches from his eyes! And on the other side of the lantern was the black moustached face of Pete Kovics, with his two black-eyed rascals behind him! Clint drew in a deep, painful breath and tried to manage a whistle.

Thus began the strangest night of Clint Saunders' life. First, Kovics and his two oldest boys dragged him off the buckskin and thawed him out; then they hauled him into the house. It was a cabin and didn't seem too big, but the place was bursting with kids. Clint remembered trying to stand up and not managing it very well. Particularly, he recalled Mrs. Kovics taking charge with her oldest girl, and putting him on the bed by the great stove and feeding him hot soup. Heavy blankets made Clint think the weight of the world was on his chest.

Then he fell asleep—a cowboy in a squatter's cabin—and dreamed of a girl. But it was not a blond girl with blue eyes; it was not Lecia. It was a strange girl, and he'd never seen her before.

When he awakened, it was dark. For a moment he couldn't remember where he was, then recalled the events of the night before. He moved a leg and happily felt the power surging through them. *God bless the Kovics,* he thought.

As he dressed, the rich aroma of steak and potatoes and coffee came to him. He was suddenly intensely hungry. He walked out into the kitchen, but at the doorway, even before entering, stopped. A girl sat at the end of the table—slim as a willow, raven-haired with long-lashed, limpid chestnut eyes—the girl of whom he had dreamed!

"There he is, Pa!" One of the boys spotted him. Everybody turned. Clint tightened his jaw, trying to ignore the burn in his cheeks and at the same time trying to give the oldest daughter the same casual look he gave any of them.

He grinned, and said, "Yep, an' I'm mighty hungry! You got any of that steer left, Kovics."

"Come. Come. Come." Kovics jumped up. He waved his thick arms, then pushed two boys down farther along the long, cloth-covered table. "Momma, another plate. A beeg one. Knives, fork, cup, Ruthie." He waved his arms again, and the Kovics family swiftly made room. It was the first time a cowboy from either of

the big ranches had been inside their cabin; it was an honor. Awed, they were especially happy to do a favor for the foreman of the Leaning T. They'd heard so much about him, and, at one time, they'd feared him. But now. . . .

"Momma, jump! Ruthie! Hot goulash, more biscuits!"

Clint sat down and eating rapidly looked up and down the table but not at the girl. He talked mostly to Kovics, and once in a while to the dark, quick-smiling woman who was his wife. But all the time his thoughts, strangely, revolved about the girl who sat opposite him.

After supper, there was a great to-do cleaning the dishes and tidying the rooms, while Kovics and Clint smoked before the great stove. Then, while the wind howled outside, there was a card game, in which everyone played, with the exception of Kovics and Clint who'd declined to join because of fatigue. But Clint noticed out of the corner of his eye that Ruth Kovics' mind didn't seem to be on the game, either. And once, he caught her glancing his way. A quick red crept over her creamy cheeks, and he felt warmth in his own, also. He knocked his cigarette ashes in the scuttle and noticed Kovics looking at him and frowning.

CHAPTER TWO

Hoedown Hellcat

WHEN Clint returned to the Leaning T the following day, craggy Tex Ruddard asked him where he'd weathered the storm. Clint, off hand, mentioned getting caught and having to hole up with the squatter, Kovics. He held his breath, half expecting the white-moustached Tex to explode. But the Leaning T owner didn't. He grunted twice, scowled, then shrugged. "Well, at least you didn't freeze to death. What about the hay?"

And when Clint told him what Manden wanted for the hay Tex did blow his top. He stamped up and down the bare ranch floor and pounded his gnarled fists.

"The damn'd robber! It's a holdup. An' me an' him supposed to be friends. Supposed to be. Always supposed to be." He stopped suddenly, looked fiercely at Clint, as if seeing something else in his young foreman; then, with a mutter Clint couldn't understand, the Leaning T owner stamped away. Clint never could fathom Tex Ruddard.

The boys in the bunkhouse good-naturedly ribbed Clint about shacking up at the squatter's cabin, but since they knew the terror of being caught on the open prairie in a blizzard, it was all in fun. However, when Slim Daley, Clint's saddle pard, made sly remarks about Kovics' pretty daughter, Clint pretended not to hear and went on giving orders. They were hauling the hay that afternoon which Tex had given orders to buy—at ten dollars a ton.

But through Clint's mind went the thought that other waddies had noticed Pete Kovics' girl. Clint reasoned it certainly wouldn't do for any cattleman to mix around there. In the cold and snow he worked his six men at rustling hay to Leaning T cattle; worked them hard.

They'd used three stacks when Tex ordered Clint to ride over to the Bar M. With payment money in his shirt pocket, Clint rode over the Flats enjoying the warm breeze from the south. Clint looked at the blue, shining sky and thought how nice it would be to stop in at Pete Kovics and thank him for saving his life, but a rider lifted out of a draw by Boston Creek. It was Bard Holloway. He rode toward Clint. He was wearing a gun.

"Out shootin' rattlers?"

Holloway's black eyes showed he didn't enjoy the thinly-veiled sarcasm in the joke.

He said, "No, I shagged that damn'd bull of Kovics into his pasture. Where you headed?"

"To pay your boss for the hay we used."

Holloway gave a quick glance toward the bulge in Clint's buttoned shirt pocket and with a grunt, pulled his horse westward. He went ten steps and wheeled around.

"After paying Manden, you keep away from the Bar M, Saunders, get me?"

"I reckon not, Holloway. Somebody said young Eddie Struz is gettin' hitched and giving a wedding dance. I'm figuring on taking Lecia."

At thirty paces, the black fury was unmistakable in Bard Holloway's small eyes. Then he jerked his mount away and rode on.

Clint waited until Holloway was out of sight, then struck out course toward the Bar M, avoiding Casper's Grove. He wanted no .45 slug coming at him from behind a brush pile. They said Bard Holloway had come to the Bar M five years ago, and nobody knew anything about his past. Judging by the way he packed that .45, Clint reasoned Holloway had seen much country.

Manden took the money with a sour grunt that could have meant anything. Clint said easily, stuffing the receipt into his pocket, "Where's Lecia?" Manden scowled, "Went to town, I reckon." But a light step on the stairway told Clint otherwise.

LECIA came into the kitchen and pulled Clint into the living room. Her cheeks were bright with excitement. "Eddie Struz is giving a wedding dance Wednesday in town. We've got to go."

"Sure. Slim Daley was telling me about it before I left this morning. I was going to ask you."

"You can ride over here, and we'll take the cutter. I'll have blankets and that big bearskin for covering. It will be fun. Just the two of us." She shivered and drew close to him.

Clint felt a strong physical excitement when Lecia Manden came close to him. Her vibrant strength pulsed through him. Yet, Clint now felt less receptive to her charms.

Puzzled, he drew her into his arms and bent his head. In her warm kiss, Clint forgot his doubts. His arms grew tighter. Her softness melted into him. He had more than a cattle empire here in his arms; he had a woman who loved him.

The approaching footsteps of Big Ed Manden parted them, and after a while, Clint left. But at the door he paused.

"Lecia," he said, "I think it'd be better if I'd bring Tex's cut-down bobsled rather than drive your dad's fancy red rig in to Sunup. It'd look better."

She frowned, then laughed quickly. "All right. I'll ride in the crate."

The night of the dance, Clint hitched Tex's two fastest bays to the cut-down bobsled and called at the Bar M at 8:30. Lecia was ready. She bundled blankets and the bearskin into the short sled and they took off across the frosty, white countryside toward town. Most of the Bar M hands already had gone in, as had the Leaning T waddies. In fact, the entire countryside was gathering for Eddie Struz's wedding dance.

Clint felt good. He drove fast and smartly. The bays stepped along, and the bells on the hames jingled softly. The shortened runners bit into the crisp snow, singing; the stars were bright and just beyond finger-reach. He felt Lecia stir beside him.

"Happy?"

"I should be. Wait until you see my dress. I had it shipped from Kansas City, and Dad nearly popped a blood vessel. It cost three steers."

Clint frowned and fell silent. Somehow, the stars seemed to be a little farther away now.

The dance was in the school house. The little building was jammed with cowboys, cattlemen, wives, girl friends, townspeople, small fry—everybody out to wish Eddie Struz a good send-off with his sweetheart. Clint and Lecia had to push their way through the press at the door to get in. The benches had been stacked, kerosene lamps glowed in their wall brackets, crepe paper hung over everything and in all colors, as if

the merry-makers had emptied the general store of its stock. A fiddle, banjo and drum were going hard at it on the platform. The swirl of gayly-dressed, stamping cowboys and their girls was something to meet with a challenge. Clint slid his arm around Lecia, gorgeous in a blue taffeta dress with glistening sequins half-hidden in its pleated folds, and whirled her into the fun.

He held her tight. He whispered. "You're the prettiest girl in the hall."

She laughed and flung back her head, making her wheat-colored ringlets sway with the motion of their bodies. "Do you like my new dress?"

"It's—it's a rip-snorter."

"Do you like it better than Alice Dugan's over there?"

Clint chuckled and didn't take his eyes off her. "I don't like her at all."

"Oh, you! You didn't even look."

"I don't have to. Lecia, you're the top rider in this corral, no two ways about that."

She slid her arm tighter around his shoulder and danced eagerly to keep up to his long whirls.

SOMEBODY claimed Lecia for the next dance, and Clint stepped out into the frosty air for a breath of fresh air. His Leaning T bunch was there and Slim was a little drunk. Opposite them on the crowded wooden steps were the Bar M men. Clint looked swiftly, but Holloway was not with them. Still, there might be trouble.

Clint said, "C'mon, Slim. I'll buy the boys a drink at Hogan's." And, taking Slim's arm, he led them across the street to the saloon.

Hogan's was crowded, as usual, but they found a place at the far end of the bar, and boisterously held on to it. Someone looked across the room and said, "Say, fellws, isn't that the boss?"

It was. Tex Ruddard was sitting at a corner table, drinking.

"Sure enough," Slim hic-cupped. "With some of his old cronies, Hank Wilder and Bud Pemble."

Clint went over. "Kinda off the reservation, boss, ain't you?" He grinned. He was feeling his drinks a little.

Tex Ruddard snapped. "I ain't makin' a damned fool of myself, anyway, Saunders. You bring that Manden filly?"

Clint felt warmth. "I reckon I don't get your meaning."

Ruddard shrugged. "Go on back to your dancin'." He reached for the bottle on the table and poured himself a stiff drink.

Clint stood motionless. It was the first time Tex Ruddard had ever acted or spoken this way with him, and, embarrassed, Clint looked at the two townsmen drinking with Tex. Hank Wilder was the Recorder of Deeds and Bud Pemble was a clerk at the court house.

He fought off his anger. Old Tex probably was talking over how Pete Kovics outfoxed him by squatting on that hayland—people always said it rankled him, especially when drinking. With a careless shrug Clint returned to Slim and the boys.

Another drink and Clint wanted to go back to the dance but he knew the Leaning T bunch were starting to feel their oats and wouldn't budge from the bar so he went down to the hall alone. He saw Lecia in the doorway with Frankie Moss, a burly young waddie from the Bar M, and they'd evidently just finished a dance, for Moss was puffing and wheezing. Somebody laughed and Moss whirled. He saw the other cowboy was drunk and he gave him a shove. But the cowboy made a saving grab and pulled Moss to the rail with him. Moss tried to throw him over, but the cowboy wasn't as drunk as the Bar M horse wrangler thought, and in a second Moss skidded down the stairs with the cowboy on top, and got the lard pounded out of him.

"Fight! Fight!" the cry went up.

A half dozen Bar M men came forward but a chunky figure was first. Bard Hollo-

way grasped the cowboy by his arm, twisted him off. He seized the shoulder and jerked him upward, and at the same motion hit him with his right fist, full and savagely, in the face. The cowboy toppled over. He lay still, ringed by the Bar M boys.

Disappointment swept the crowd. The wave of spectators went back to the hall. The cowboy blinking, glowered, saw the odds, then staggered off. The Bar M boys swaggered away and lined the stairs once more.

Clint moved his jaws a little. He started moving out of the shadows only to start back when he heard Lecia's laugh, short, brittle.

"It's about time folks learn who rules the range around here," she said.

Ten minutes later Clint was standing beside Lecia in the hall, but now he was silent. She smiled up brightly, coyly, "Was my man out getting drunk?" The brittleness was gone. She touched his chin.

He shook his head. "Just two drinks."

She put a finger to his cheek. "Why the long face? Aren't you having fun?" Again the girlish coyness.

"Just thinking, that's all."

"Thinking? At a time like this. We should be dancing. Come—" She froze, her left arm half upraised, and from her expression Clint whirled toward the door, expecting anything—anything except what was there.

A GIRL stood there—a girl slim as a willow, one with a mass of soft dark hair neatly drawn around her small, shapely head. She was dressed in something black, Clint vaguely noticed, but at the white V of her neck a pretty little cameo brooch rested. It was on a black ribbon, and something about the picture of Ruthie Kovics there struck home to Clint's pounding heart. She looked—she looked—he couldn't finish the thought.

"Well, of all things," Lecia's voice cut in beside him. "The Kovics girl!"

Clint said, "How—how did she come?"

"Must have come with Jason Smith and his wife who live up the river road past their house. They're unwrapping now, I see."

Clint slid his arm around Lecie. The music began. But Lecia kept turning her head, watching backward. "She's watching us. What do you suppose for?"

"I dunno," Clint said. He felt warm.

"And look at that awful dress. It must have been her mother's. It's too large. It's tucked in at the waist and the shoulders are too large."

"Say, are you dancing with me or what?" Clint said pretending a laugh, but a moment later, he stole a look over Lecia's nestling blond head. He didn't notice the black dress. He didn't notice the tucks at the waist or the slight drooping at the shoulders. He saw a girl standing there, alone, and something about her, her poise, the spots of color high in his cheeks, her ruby lips held his gaze.

Her dark eyes, quiet and proud, met his across the hall, and Clint, caught staring, knew he blushed.

"Clint Saunders! Are you drunk? That's the second time you missed the step." Lecia's voice! Faint, oh so faint beneath that laughing way of hers, he detected a bit of what had taken place outside. And suddenly Clint knew those stars, that had seemed at his fingertips on the way to town, had jumped backward to their trillion miles away. And, more important, he no longer wanted to reach them.

He wanted Ruthie Kovics.

But he didn't dance with her. And nobody else did, either, except a few of the young kids from town. The Bar M shadow lay over the place. This was cattle country. And Clint, cussing himself, saw her chin tilt higher and higher and the red spots grow on her cheeks. He began ducking out and across the street for drinks.

He noticed she danced twice with Andrew Polie, a hulking dry farmer from up

on the benches who also ran some sheep, and Clint's long fingers itched. He wondered how long it had been since he'd first begun disliking red-headed sheepmen, Andrew Polie in particular.

Lecia was giving all her Bar M punchers a whirl. She was even dancing with Holloway. Clint went across to Hogan's. His Leaning T outfit were still there, fairly well bent out of shape now. Tex Ruddard was still talking with his cronies at their table. Clint tossed off a double-header and sourly went back to the hall. For him, the night had turned as sour as his last drink had tasted.

Lecia was dancing again with Holloway, but Clint's smoulder of anger was not one of jealousy. He swung his eyes around the hall to where Ruthie Kovics had sat before with Jason Smith and his wife. She was not there.

He melted back into the fringes of the crowd, scanning the dancers, particularly the girls. She was not in the hall. The vague uneasiness in his chest stirred stronger. He thought of drifting over and asking Jason Smith where she was, then swiftly discarded the thought. A dozen people would overhear him, and even Smith would think it strange. He moved outside uncertainly. The cowboy who'd had the ruckus with Frankie Moss was seated on the bottom step, nursing a bottle by his sour lonesome.

Clint said, "Hey, Rollings, see anything of that squatter's daughter, Ruth Kovics?" He tried to make his voice casual.

The cowboy looked up. "Hello, Clint. Sure. Saw her take off in Polie's cutter with him 'bout fifteen minutes ago. Takin' her home, I reckon. Why?"

Clint didn't answer. *She was letting Andrew Polie take her home.* He recalled the tilt to her chin, the red spot on each cheek. Her pride had been terribly hurt. No one had danced with her. He hadn't. Why, he didn't know, but now she had sneaked away and left the Smith's to go home with Polie. Clint knew it was on an angry self dare.

But she didn't know Polie's reputation. The red-headed bench farmer was not the kind of man a father would let his daughter go out with, and here was Pete Kovics' girl at her first dance . . .

Clint looked around and found himself in front of Hogan's Tavern. He saw the Leaning T horses at the rack, and before he knew it, he'd swung a long leg over Slim's saddle and whirled the big dun up the road and out of town heading toward Boston Creek.

CHAPTER THREE

"You Hurt My Girl!"

HE RODE hard. The miles whipped past. He saw the cutter's marks where it sliced away from the river road and he knew where Polie would stop. That grove a half mile before Kovics' cabin.

The dun's ears pricked forward. Clint listened intently. That was a girl's cry in the night air! He spurred the dun over the loose snow.

The bulk of the cutter loomed in a thicket alongside the road. They didn't hear him coming. Polie didn't see Clint until he'd leaped off his horse and reached across into the cutter. Polie released the girl and with an unrecognizing oath, snarled, "Who in blazes are you and what do you want?"

In the split second before Clint's fist hit him, Polie recognized the Leaning T ramrod. He struggled to loose himself from the cutter robes swiftly, but Clint, with a strange and furious anger tightening his throat, gave Andrew Polie no chance. He pounded the man's face. He lashed and clubbed the sheepman down into the bottom of the cutter. He gripped with his left and piledrove with his right. In two minutes, Polie went limp.

The girl pulled him off. "Don't. You'll kill him."

Panting, Clint stepped back. "He deserves it." He turned and looked at her then, swiftly. Her coat was rumpled, her dress, at the shoulder, was torn. She was swiftly patting her dark hair back into place, the fear of a moment ago draining from her eyes, the pride coming back in.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"Did he . . . hurt you?"

"No."

"What in the world ever possessed you to go home with him?"

Her chin tilted. "That is *my* business." She gathered her skirts and coat about her and began hurrying up the road toward her father's house, a mile away.

Clint stood motionless. Strange fires burned through his veins. Man, she was a looker! The flash of those eyes, that tumbled dark hair, that creamy skin. . . .

The man at his feet was stirring. Clint looked down and he caught a back-lash of his own emotions and it jolted him. No, he wouldn't be another Polie.

He swung into the dun's saddle and rode up beside her, and in a quiet voice, as a man speaking to some kid, said:

"Here, I'll give you a hand up. You can ride to the cabin behind me."

For an instant he thought she was going to refuse, then she stopped, put up her hand and he swung her up behind him.

Neither said a word. At the cabin, which was dark, she slid off and stood for a second looking up. "Thank you *Mister* Clint Saunders." Then she went in.

He stared. Was it sarcasm? Or did she mean it? Women—he shook his head—he understood men and cattle but these women, even young ones like Ruth seemed to know they had something on men. And they sure knew how to use what they had. As he rode back to town, Clint could still feel the touch of her small hands on his back as she'd hung on. They felt warm.

When he got back, the dance was over. The last of the merry-makers were bundling up and going home. He swung the dun in at Hogan's hitching rack, and Slim and the boys who'd just come out, called, "Where the hell you been?"

"Ridin'. Where's Lecia Manden?"

A raspy voice on the top step said, "Bard Holloway took her home half an hour ago." Clint whirled. Tex Ruddard continued, his leathery face screwed up tight. "You sure as hell's got things mixed up." Then he pitched forward into the snow onto his face.

Clint took him home in the cut-down bobsled and wished he were as drunk and peaceful as old Tex. This had been one hell of a night.

THE story didn't get around for weeks, and then it did so only sketchily, for none of the principals was talking. A spell of bad weather settled over the Basin for a month keeping ranch folk in, and Clint was glad for that. Once Slim came back from Sunup saying a fellow reported Andrew Polie had gotten a busted nose and his face re-made the night of the Struz wedding dance. Slim looked angle-eyed at the young foreman as he told it at supper, but Clint kept eating. Later, Danny Foster came from a visit at the Bar M and, with eyes on Clint, said, "They sure as the devil got it in for us fellows over there an' I dunno why. Holloway sneered and asked how you was, Clint." This was in the barn where they were getting their gear ready for spring roundup.

"Yeah?" Clint said and went on stitching his new bedroll sack.

Tex Ruddard, down two stalls, currying a horse stopped and listened. Slim glanced at Danny Foster.

"Lecia didn't send up one of them mash notes for Clint; you know, the type she usually sends with the one of us who calls down there, did she?" There was a sly note in his drawly voice, and Clint quickly glanced his way. What did Slim know? Or did he just guess? Slim had once before mentioned Pete Kovics' daughters. Slim

maybe noted his horse gone from that hitching rack the night of the dance, and maybe Slim heard more in town than he'd told them.

Clint's strong fingers pushed and pulled at the sewing needle steadily. He didn't give a darn. Sure, he knew Lecia Manden had found out he'd pounded hell out of Andrew Polie and then taken Ruth Kovics home. He knew she couldn't help but have found out. Bard Holloway would see to that. Holloway would get to the bottom of any dirt.

He went on, sewing grimly. And then he felt someone watching him. He looked up to see Tex Ruddard staring sourly over the stall boards his way. Clint dropped his eyes. What in hell had gotten into the boss the past couple of months?

Spring roundup! Bar M was in charge this year, Leaning T having had it the year before. So Bard Holloway was the chief ramrod. Clint held his riders well in hand. "No trouble. This is work-time," he strictly ordered. And all the spreads joined in to comb the rugged Indigoes, branding, separating, ear-notching, herding home stuff back to home range. Soon the grass grew long, the sun hot. The days were filled with dusty work, fourteen hours in saddle, rain squalls. There were nights in never-dry bedrolls, quick, hot meals, rugged, monotonous rides and plenty of dogies to cut and brand. There were the cold mornings and bone-jolting broncs to fork and ride out, and then the growing heat and the cantankerous cattle. . . .

Toward the middle of June, the big roundup came around Storm Cap, the biggest peak of the Indigoes, and headed for Big M range. No obvious quarrels had broken out between the Bar M waddies and the Leaning T cowboys—there'd been too much work for that—but now that roundup was ending, an edge began to creep into conversations and fireside talk. Even Holloway's crisp orders took on a new bark.

Slim and the Leaning T men looked toward Clint, but Clint pretended not to hear or see these new things. Tex Ruddard, because of lumbago, hadn't showed up at roundup, and Big Ed Manden, strangely, hadn't ridden out once.

One night Frankie Moss, the lardy horse wrangler, called across the chuckwagon fire to Holloway, "I seen Andy Polie up on the bench today. Hell, that stinkin' sheepman wouldn't be any competition to me. Nor to any self-respectin' cowman."

Slim shot a look down the fire at Clint, but Clint understood all too well. Then Clint spotted Holloway and the sly smiling Frankie Moss, and his long brown fingers grew motionless on the fork and tin plate in his hand. Finally, he resumed eating slowly, casually, as if he hadn't heard.

But there was a restless hum of anger that spread over the Leaning T men behind him. And Holloway and Frankie Moss and the Bar M punchers widened their grins.

The little cow outfits dropped off, one by one, shagging the small stock with them that was theirs and hadn't been dropped off at home range. It was only Bar M and Leaning T now. Holloway and Bar M weren't satisfied with the roundup. Since they were the spread that supplied the grub, chuck wagon, cook and bedroll wagon, they were supposed to get the sleepers and slick-ears, but Clint, in charge the year before, had done such a good job that there weren't many this spring. Bar M had lost money ramrodding the roundup.

So Clint smiled as the end drew near and he closed his ears to their barbs. He had his secret thoughts. They had to do with a slim, willowy girl with dark hair and bright proud spots high on her cheeks. Let Bard Holloway have Lecia Manden.

Clint also felt he had done right by his boss, Tex Ruddard, in keeping the peace. Leaning T had had a good crop of calves; Leaning T had done well and with mighty little expense. The world was a mighty good place in which to live. He began to wonder how to approach Ruthie Kovics;

how a cowman would make it look right calling at a squatter's cabin. He closed his mind to what Tex Ruddard would think.

THE last night they camped on upper Boston Creek, near the now-depleted hay stacks, and at sunup the next day the two outfits sorted the day herd and each headed back for home range.

Holloway sneered. "Damn few we got for what it cost us."

Clint shrugged, rolling a smoke in saddle. "Your hard luck."

Frank Moss, to one side, suddenly burst out laughing.

Clint lifted a brow, and Slim shoved out his jaw. Clint said shortly, "Get the cattle moving, Slim."

A mile north on home range Slim fell in beside Clint. "What did fat-boy mean by that?"

Clint shrugged. Then the reticence of three months fell from him. "What do you know about the night of Eddie Struz's wedding dance?"

"Kid, I heard how you followed Andy Polie, who was taking the Kovics girl home, and how you pounded hell out of him and then took the gal home yourself, just letting Lecia Manden sit. When she found out about it, she sure became furious."

Clint smoked silently as they jogged on.

Slim said, "I didn't want to spill all the beans. Old Tex would really bust a buckskin—bringin' Bar M fury down on Leaning T."

"I wonder," Clint mused.

"Sure, he hates Bar M. He hates Big Ed Manden's guts. Look how Manden swiped them hay lands of his, more or less half a dozen years back where Manden had that shack built fer his hay-cutters. But Tex is afraid of Bar M. You know that."

"Yes," Clint said softly, "I believe he is." He was thinking, thinking hard. Trying to piece the whole puzzle, trying to fit himself into it, and the girls, Lecia Manden, Ruthie Kovics. And even as he thought casually of Ruth Kovics, the heat began in his chest and crept into his throat. Damn it, what should he do? He knew he was in love with Ruth Kovics. But—what to do?

He took a slow deep breath. He might as well have it out with Ruddard right now, now that roundup was over. He flipped his cigarette butt away and lifted his reins.

"Take the cattle to West valley, Slim. I'll ride in and ask Ruddard how far north he wants 'em scattered."

It took him longer than he'd thought necessary to reach the home ranch—the buckskin didn't have the old git to his long legs for some reason that day. It was close to sundown when Clint's weary horse loped into the yard. Then he was astounded to see a puffing plough horse before the verandah and two men there talking. Clint swung off, peering, and his astonishment widened.

The man on the bottom steps, spouting angrily and waving his arms was Pete Kovics.

"Here is my foreman now," Clint heard Tex say. Ruddard had his left foot bandaged. He hobbled and looked in ugly mood.

"What's the trouble?" Clint asked, walking up.

"Kovics says somebody killed his bull."

"Yeah? When?"

"Last night."

"Why come here about it?" Clint tried to be casual about it. He didn't know exactly how to approach Tex Ruddard about telling him that he was going to take up with Ruth Kovics, and yet this other man, he hoped some day, would be his father-in-law. He turned casually toward Kovics.

It was in time to see the fires of rage light in Kovics' black eyes. He was facing Clint's buckskin.

"See. I told you! It is the same horse! I have seen it two-three times now! The other was a dun with white front stockings! I make no mistake, Ruddard! You keel my bull! You keel my bull!" He screamed it at Clint, coming forward and shaking

gnarled fists angrily before Clint's eyes.

Clint blinked and stepped back.

"What the hell you talking about? I didn't kill any bull."

"Kovics says you did. Early last evening, just at dusk. He says two men rode into his west pasture and shot the animal on his home ground." Ruddard's voice seemed to snap with bitterness at the word home.

"How come he thinks I did it?"

"He recognized your buckskin. Also Slim's dun with the white front feet. What was the reason, Saunders?" Ruddard's voice was vibrant with suppressed anger.

"I didn't kill his damn bull," Clint snorted. "Last night Slim and I didn't even leave camp once, except for night guard."

"You did keel my bull! I chased you but my horse is too slow. I shoot. I hear you laugh back at me."

Clint knocked down the man's fists. Anger was slowly crawling into his throat. "Quit shovin' them things into my face. I say I didn't do it!"

"You did! I saw you!" Kovics screamed it.

Clint batted down the fists again. Tex moved down a step.

"Cut it out, Saunders. If this man is right, you'll pay for his property."

"But I tell you I didn't! I wasn't near his place for—for months!" Anger was fast taking over his exasperation.

"You—you devil! I saw you bring home my Ruthie! I see you ride away quick. When she come in, I see she crying and her dress torn. You—you cowboys are devils! You hurt my girl—"

Clint grabbed Kovics by his shirt front. Now there was a new, wild, furious anger in his throat. "I didn't hurt your daughter! Do you hear me? Did she say so?"

"I saw you! I saw you!"

"Did she say so?" Clint roared it. He shook Kovics.

"She stubborn. She cry. She won't say anything. I beat her—"

"You—you—" Clint flung the man, then he leaped onto him again. "You beat your daughter, trying to make her tell a lie?" All the fires of the past three months, his tender thoughts, his dreams, his yearnings and inner struggles, now blazed forth like a prairie fire hitting a tinder-dry valley. He hit Kovics.

The ragged man leaped up from the yard dirt. He darted toward his horse. Clint started after him but Tex Ruddard hobbled in front of him brandishing a home-made pole porch chair.

"Let him be, Saunders, or I'll brain you with this."

Words came hard between Clint's set teeth. "He doesn't know the truth. I never touched his daughter. I—"

Crack!

It was as if the sound spun Clint Saunders. Then he caught himself halfway around. He whirled down into a crouch, and, when the second rifle shot came, he was going in under the bullet. He grabbed the rifle. Kovics was strong but the young foreman's strength was like ten men. He wrenched the Winchester from Kovics' hands. He swung it once and downed the man.

Then he stood there, panting, looking down. Blood came from Kovics' black, matted hair. Blood came through the blue chambray shirt at Clint's left shoulder.

"He almost killed me."

Ruddard gave him one hard, cutting look "Maybe he should have."

CHAPTER FOUR

Eight Guns to Two

CLINT lay on his hotel bed staring up at the faded grapes in the wall paper. All the dingy mustiness of that hotel room weighed upon him, seemed in keeping with his thoughts. It had been his home for two days now—the slanting green shade, the rowelled brown enamel on the foot of the bed, the dresser with its cracked mirror and

bottle-ring marks—its dreariness at the end of this hot summer day epitomized his years here at Sunup and the Leaning T. He was nothing; he had nothing; he was ready to drift—the kid from the Wild Bunch who had tried to make a go of it but had never quite succeeded. What was lacking in his try?

He went back over the years. Lord knows he had tried to curb his hot temper. He had forced himself to grow up swiftly, in speech, manners, judgment. He had won himself a job, a surprisingly good job as foreman. To make sure of it, he had handled his men with care; he had put away his guns. And he had made money for Tex Ruddard. Then where had he failed?

A lone fly buzzed against the screen, wanting out to the hot stillness outside. Clint rolled a smoke, wet it down and watched the fly. He was that fly—buzzing and batting its wings aimlessly. He had a few dollars in his pocket—all that was left of his wages after Ruddard took out the price of Kovics' bull—he had a buckskin horse and a saddle. It wasn't much for four years work. His guns—he looked at them hanging by belts in the closet—he'd had them before he'd come. A few memories, a few inner feelings, new but that now didn't count—they too were with him, for what they were worth. He blew smoke slowly toward the grapes, and his young, stubbled lips were a harsh, angular frame.

Tonight he'd ride out of Sunup.

He heard an outfit ride into town, whooping and hollering, and remembered it was Saturday night, and he wondered if Slim and the boys would be in. He should have hung around and bid the boys good-bye anyway, but with Tex Ruddard shouting and furious and thinking the worst of him, he'd lost his own temper. He'd told off Ruddard and packed his warbag. Nobody could tell that irascible old devil anything. Nor understand him, either.

Clint smoked on, and he heard other outfits, lesser ones, ride into town, and when his cigarette was down to lip-line, he swung his long legs off the bed and stood up. Time to ride. But at the window he pinched out the smoke and stood in the slanting red sunlight. Grayness already was edging the street and the four corners below.

Hogan's was doing a good business across, and there were plenty of rigs in town. He couldn't see directly below because of the tin roof of the hotel veranda, but he could partially see a team of blacks, work horses, hitched and ready to go. They were pulling a load of fence posts.

Clint narrowed his eyes. The outfit looked familiar. Then he heard a laugh from across the street and he stiffened slightly. That was Frankie Moss' high-pitched cackle. He moved his eyes and saw the Bar M horse wrangler swaggering in front of the group on Hogan's wood steps, and Moss was pointedly fondling a jack knife as he closed it, laughingly, and put it into his sagging jeans.

Clint saw other Bar M around Moss. They were all grinning, and Clint wondered at the joke. Then he saw a man climb onto the load of poles, and two black-thatched kids get on behind him. Clint recognized Pete Kovics and two of his boys. He grew motionless.

Kovics waved to somebody up the street in the direction of Tanley's General Merchandise Emporium, then lifted the reins and shook the horses into the pull.

At once the tugs parted, the wagon tongue dropped from the yoke, and the horses walked right on pulling the man by the reins out of the lumber wagon seat into the dust of the street.

The knot of Bar M punchers burst into a loud guffaw.

Kovics sprang to his feet, looked at his cut leather tugs, then whirled facing the group. Frank Moss, his single .45 swinging negligently at his fat right thigh, swaggered forward. He cocked back his limp hat.

"What's the matter, squatter, accident?"

Without warning, Kovics hit him,

knocked him flat. And as Moss lay in the dirt, the laughter died. Stillness came over the street.

Then a man parted from the group. It was Bard Holloway, and Clint, with surprise, noted he was also wearing a gun; so were all the Bar M men he now saw as they fanned out.

Kovics saw Holloway approaching. He turned and grabbed one of the smaller fence posts, but Holloway was too quick. He reached up and wrenched it away from the smaller man.

Moss was now groveling to his knees. He shook his head, blinking upward.

Clint heard Holloway's cold, even words. "Get up, Frank. Hit him."

Kovics' eyes darted around the ring. One of his boys, the younger one, began whimpering. Kovics licked his lips. He turned to Holloway. "He cut my tugs. They cost me fifteen dollar—"

He didn't see the side blow. Frank Moss hit him full and savagely high on the temple, and Kovics crumpled to the street.

CLINT took a slow deep breath. It was the old, old fight. He had seen it many times—wolves, men, coyotes—what was the difference? The weaker, the hated, the man who wasn't wanted must be downed, killed or driven away. Bar M didn't want Pete Kovics. They wanted his hay land. They had waited this long; now they were striking, for some reason no longer afraid of the big spread to the north, the Leaning T. Hadn't they gotten away with that land grab on upper Boston four years ago?

Slowly, Clint turned and reached into his closet for his holsters. He strapped the right one on first, then the left one in order to hold the right one snugger for a fast draw—a trick Bill Day had taught him—then he went out the room and down to the first floor by way of the front stairs.

Now, it was no secret to him who had killed Kovics' bull. He recalled Big Ed Manden's threat of many months ago. Moss was horse wrangler. He and Holloway had roped the buckskin and Slim's dun the night they'd gotten onto home range and went and shot the critter purposely in sight of Kovics' house. Clint remembered Moss's wild laugh when they'd parted from the Bar M bunch, the time he'd told Holloway it was his hard luck Bar M hadn't gotten many sleepers. Moss had laughed at the words, "Hard luck." Clint recalled how logy the buckskin had been that day on his ride back to the Leaning T.

He settled his sombrero straight, and the movement made him wince. The bullet scratch he'd received from Kovics' rifle the day before throbbed. But that wouldn't interefere with his draw. He was equally good with both hands. He'd need both hands to outface that Bar M crowd. He was surprised at his coolness, his utter lack of anger, his walking into this melee as if it were fate. He decided it was fate. If he were going down anytime, he might as well go down in the street out there at the Sun-up crossroads.

He thought of a willowy girl and he wished she were his.

He stopped at the front door. Big Ed Manden's buggy was at the hotel's hitching rack, and seated in it, watching what was happening in the street, were Big Ed and Lecia.

She saw him first. Her eyes widened, then her head rose haughtily, lifting the expensive, lacy hat she was wearing. It was the first time they'd met, face to face, since Eddie Struz's wedding dance. Then Big Ed turned and saw him standing in front of the door.

The red from the bulge at Ed Manden's neck grew upward; then his wide jaw came out slowly, ugly, and finally a sneer came over his face.

"So here is the boy."

Clint looked coolly from Ed Manden's face to Lecia's, which now also had taken on some of her father's disdain. Clint said nothing. He touched the brim of his hat

briefly and walked down the hotel steps, past their buggy and into the street. The boys of the Bar M still didn't see him. Kovics was still down. He looked up, dazed. One of his boys was crying, leaning against the load of poles. The other was trying to lift one of the posts. Clint kept on walking.

A Boxed J puncher saw him first and stared at him.

"Saunders!"

Every man in the street came around in his tracks. Clint stopped twenty feet from the nearest puncher. He looked at Frankie Moss.

"Frankie," he said softly. "We've had enough of your mouseplay. Step back. I want to talk to you."

"What—what do you mean?"

"You killed Kovics' bull. You borrowed our horses from the cavvy and rode them to put the blame on Slim and me. Own up to it."

Moss wet his lips. He looked toward Holloway, then back at Clint. "I—I don't know what you're talking about," he said, gathering strength in the knowledge of Bar M numbers.

"Your string has run out around here, Saunders," a third voice broke in. "You'd better breeze while you've got a whole skin."

Clint looked at Holloway, and he murmured, "I'm glad you came in on the hand, Bard. You're really the man I want to talk to. You came into the country a little while before I did and started working for the Bar M. You know, I've been thinking Tex Ruddard didn't hire me to do away with Pete Kovics; he wanted me to sorta take care of you, Bard. About that time, I recall, you jumped the Boston Creek line and took over that hay land on the flats. Maybe you did it on your own, or maybe on your boss' orders. I dunno, but I also reckon you were looking ahead, thinking of Lecia, while I, just a reckless kid, trying to live down a bad name, had just hung up my guns and buckled under. Why Tex Ruddard kept me on at the Leaning T, I don't know. Mebbe he jest liked me."

Holloway laughed shortly. "You're using a lot of words, Saunders. What they going to mean?"

"Just this, Holloway. It's you or me. Now."

HOLLOWAY'S laugh sounded a little husky. "Don't be a fool, Saunders. I've got eight guns against just your two guns."

"Draw, Holloway!"

The chiseled, handsome face tightened. Holloway looked at the man crouched there. The man didn't move. Holloway wet his lips briefly.

"You're signing your own death papers, kid."

No answer.

Holloway's black eyes shuttled to the two in the buggy, then back to the lone man before him. There wasn't a sound on the street.

"Saunders, I'll give you a chance to git out of town—"

Clint Saunders walked forward with slow steps. Holloway wet his lips again. He was pale now, his right arm stiff. Two feet from the Bar M foreman, Clint stopped. His left hand came up and around in a ringing slap. Holloway's black hat flew off his head.

Holloway's eyes opened wide. His whole body stiffened, but with his glance interlocked with Clint's, he didn't draw. His face had grown ashen.

"Get out of town, Holloway. Get on your horse an' ride." Clint Saunders took out his right. 45 and without taking his eyes from the eyes of the other man he blasted a shot at Bard Holloway's feet, then another, another . . . Holloway was running to his horse.

The thud of his horse's hoofs faded down the street. Bard Holloway had disappeared without looking back. . . .

Clint shoved back his gun and turned around. Frankie Moss' moist face was jerking around the mouth. "Frankie," Clint said. "I reckon you'd better ride out, too." He looked over the six other Bar M men, and they were watching him. "You others can stay. I reckon you are just good cow punchers."

He turned and walked for the boardwalk, passing between Ed Manden's buggy and another rig hitched at the hotel rack. Big Ed Manden didn't say a word. The girl in the buggy held her knuckles to her lips and she was wide-eyed, as if, for once, she had misjudged a man. And Clint walked on. He was headed to get his own horse and ride from Sunup.

But at the planking, he stopped. A girl stood there, with a market basket on her arm. It was Ruth Kovics. And then Clint knew she was the one her father had waved to and was driving up the street to pick up when the trouble struck. Seeing her eyes, Clint thought the world had stopped moving in that moment in Sunup. The light of all womanhood was glowing in their depths.

Clint, with no conscious movement, took off his hat. His eyes watched hers. He read their feeling, and a delicious terror was born in his chest.

"Good afternoon—Ruth," he said softly, staring at her.

The corners of her lips moved, awakening.

"I—" But Pete Kovics spoiled the scene. He stepped before Clint, gripping both his arms with his horny, work-calloused ones, and there were tears running down the weathered face which fell into the black moustache.

"You no have to pay for my bull now. I know who keel heem. It was that fat one, that Frankie Moss and that Holloway. Pete Kovics is ver' sorry. Pete Kovics is ashamed. Cleent, I love you. I thank you. I am most happy to know such a brave man—"

"*Tex*!' It escaped from Clint, involuntarily. His boss was standing in the doorway of the hotel bar, and he could see Tex had been drinking again. "What are you doin' in town?"

"I was just watchin' a man come alive ag'in, that's what. I was gettin' drunk all afternoon tryin' to decide if I should hire you back ag'in, or give up on you." He hiccupped and grabbed the frame for support.

"Kid," he added. "You guessed why I hired you in the first place. But you forgot a man has to keep on fightin', holdin' himself up all the time. You put up your guns an' knuckled down too easy. I thought it was that Manden filly. Then I thought you was afraid of Holloway. I dunno, but I kept on waitin' an' watchin' until I finally gave up. But now, Saunders, my hand, you got your job back."

He started to pitch forward, but saved himself. His fierce little eyes focused on the willowy figure in the sunlight, and he smiled in recognition.

"Clint, I filed a homestead on that hayland up on the flats. My friends in the court house fixed it up fer me. I was going to put Slim up there when you left, but I reckon you'll do now. We might have to fight a little fer it, but maybe not now. And, Clint—" he tried to wink slyly—"they's a cabin already started there—" He started to go down, saved himself and turned back toward the bar.

Clint moved past Kovics toward the girl. He didn't feel half as afraid when facing down Bard Holloway.

"Will you—let me carry the basket for you?"

"I can. It's just to the wagon."

"No." He took it. "Ruth, I—will you walk down by the school house with me now?"

"Yes, Clint." There was a quiet, possessive touch to her hand as she took his arm. And Clint thrilled to it. Women certainly had a way about them. ★ ★ ★

HONKATONK ANGEL

One was a lovely blonde honkatonk angel, and the other was a bewitching dark-haired temptress.... And Del had to choose between the two!

By Jonathan Craig

IT WAS hot here in his living quarters over the Domino, hot even for a mid-August night in the border country.

He watched Julie working the comb through the burnished brightness of her blonde hair and wondered how she could look so fresh and lovely on a night like this. And he wondered, too, how much of the heat was really the weather and

And there it was again: Julie or Laurie?

how much was due to the whiskey he had drunk. He seldom drank. Few successful gamblers did. But few gamblers ever met a woman like Yvonne Laurie. . . .

And there it was again. Julie here in the room with him, while he could think only of Yvonne.

He moved to the table and refilled his glass from the decanter, knowing Julie was watching him in the mirror on her dressing table, knowing she knew what was in his heart. But not all of it, he thought. Not the part that's going to crush her.

He sipped the whiskey slowly, vaguely aware of the saloon sounds welling up from the Domino—the clicking purr of the wheels, the fall of chips, the fast, bright piano music—and suddenly he remembered that night two years ago when he had first met Julie. His room. His Julie. Guilt tore at him; guilt—and compassion for Julie. He put the glass down, and for once his gambler's fingers trembled.

He said, "They'll be pounding the tables pretty soon, Julie." He forced himself to look at her reflection in the mirror. She was fastening a brooch to the low-cut bodice of her gown, but he knew her eyes had been on him. They were blue eyes, wide-set and beautiful, and sometimes when she was troubled they were smoky. They were smoky now as she smiled back at him. But he didn't want to meet her eyes. He looked at her lips, thinking of how he had once hungered for their warmth.

She stood up and smoothed her gown over her hips and came close to him. She was not an especially small girl, but she came only to his shoulders. She took his hands in her own and brought his fingers up against her cheeks, still smiling at him with that ineffable sadness.

Her voice was very soft. "Please fasten this necklace." After he had fastened it, she turned came up on her tip-toes and kissed him. "Thanks, darling." She kissed him again, and this time her arms came up around his neck, and her fingers slid through the thick hair at the back of his neck and pulled him hard against her. Her whole young body was in that kiss, savage and demanding, and Del realized, she was trying in the only way she knew to win him back to her. He returned her kiss, meeting fire with fire, marveling at the supple strength of the rounded body in his arms.

Then, suddenly, she was out of his arms, and she was crying. There were no tears. He knew she was beyond tears. But the bare shoulders moved with her inward crying, and her breast rose and fell too rapidly for normal breathing. The blue eyes were smoky, almost black.

She said, "It . . . it's no good any more, is it, Del?"

He stared at the pale olive sheen of her shoulders. There was nothing to say.

She forced a smile, and he knew what the effort must be costing her.

"I love you, Del," she said. "I could never belong to anyone else. *No* one." She took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "Are you sure about Yvonne? About the way you feel toward her?"

Her eyes were looking straight into his, watching him closely.

"Things happen to a man, Julie," he said.

She glanced down at her low-cut, skin-tight red gown. "And to a woman, too."

He nodded. Julie would have been some good man's respectable wife, with a home and babies, if it hadn't been for him. Now all she had was a red dress.

Neither of them spoke for several long seconds. Then Julie said. "I guess I'd better go downstairs and sing for them."

"I guess so."

She walked to the door, then turned to face him again.

"Listen to those sounds down there, Del. They're *our* sounds. Yours and mine. This is our world here, Del, here in the Domino. But outside, on the other side of those batwings down there, there's another

world. Folks out there hate the likes of you and me. They despise us. You're a gambler and a saloon keeper. And I—" her eyes were stormy beneath their sooty lashes—"I'm the gambler's woman." She opened the door and left the room, shoulders straight, not looking back at him.

HE LISTENED to the click of her high heels going down the steps, and then he turned to the table and poured another drink. He heard the burst of applause and the cat-calls, and knew Julie had come out on the tiny stage beside the piano. And then the saloon sounds were hushed, and there was only the sound of the piano and Julie's voice. It was an untrained voice, yet good. A very young girl's voice. And yet, as he listened to her, he could hear the maturity and the sadness there. He knew who was responsible for that maturity and sadness, and the knowledge fed new fuel to the burning guilt inside him.

And still—in ten minutes—he was going to be with Yvonne Laurie.

He finished his drink and lifted his derringer from the table. Small and deadly. A gambler's gun. Once he had worn a brace of .44's. And before that he had been broke and hungry and dependent on his two hard fists. He had come a long way. He owned an honest gambling house, and the most beautiful girl in the Territory was in love with him. There was money in the safe there in the corner, and not a dollar of it had been gained dishonestly. And pretty soon he was going to be with Yvonne Laurie. . . .

He slid the derringer in his belt, tugged down the flowered vest across the butt, and buttoned his coat across it. He blew out the lantern and the lamp on the table and walked down the steps that led down to the rear entrance of the Domino. He couldn't face Julie on his way to see Yvonne.

As he stepped out into the shadows behind the Domino, a tall form detached itself from the wall and moved toward him.

"Shannon!"

The derrigner was in Del's hand in a blur of movement that was almost pure instinct, and at the same instant he jerked his big body to one side.

But the other man's hands were empty. He laughed bitterly. "I ain't got a gun, Shannon."

Del recognized the voice of Billy Martin, Julie's brother, hardly more than a kid himself.

"Evening, Billy," Dell said, trying to make it friendly.

"Never mind the polite palaver," Billy said. "I came to warn you, Shannon. Just this once."

Del studied the angry young face in the wash of moonlight. "That so, Billy? About what?"

"About what you're doing to my sister. I never did anything when you brought her here. I knew she loved you. I wanted her to be happy. But now . . ."

Del wet his lips. "And now, Billy?"

"Now you're carrying on with that snooty Laurie woman. The whole town's talking."

"The town always talks, Billy. I've been good to your sister. You know that."

Billie stepped closer. "Sure, you've been good to her. That's the only reason I ain't killed you before now. But I'm warning you, Shannon! You *keep on* being good to her! You made her what she it. There ain't no place for her to go now. If you hurt her, I'll kill you. I swear it!"

"That's quite a speech for a young fellow," Del said quietly.

"It ain't a speech. It's a promise!"

Del took a slim panatela from his case, bit the end from it, and took his time lighting it, thinking. Thinking hard.

"Well?" Billy said tightly.

"When you're older, Billy, you'll understand these things. "You'll—"

"I'm older than Julie."

"Yes. But women are different that way.

They're born knowing about these things."

Billy's voice was thick with his anger, shaking with it. "There's one thing I *do* know, Shannon. I ain't afraid of you. I know how fast you are with a gun, but that don't make me weak in the guts like it does some gents. I'm telling you if you hurt Julie, I'll kill you!"

He turned and stalked away down the dark alley along the side of the Domino.

Del sucked cigar smoke deep into his lungs and let it out slowly through his nostrils, watching Billy Martin fading into the blackness of the alley. Billy would keep his word, he knew. He worshiped his sister, always had.

Now, in the sudden stillness behind the Domino, Del could hear Julie singing. He listened to the sweet sadness of her voice a moment, and then he ground the cigar beneath his heel and walked along behind the dark hulks of buildings toward Flower Street.

DEL started to turn in at the gate of the big house where Yvonne was staying, but then he saw her coming down the path to him. He waited for her on the plank walk. She walked gracefully, like a goddess, he thought. A dark-haired goddess in a border hell-town. He held the gate for her, feeling the same strange tightness in his chest and throat that the sight of her always brought to him.

Flower Street was bathed in bright moonlight, and when she took his arm and smiled up at him, it seemed to Del Shannon as if her beauty was almost more than he could bear. The moonlight made the soft, black hair shimmer brightly, and her skin had a warm ivory sheen that made her dark eyes seem immense. They were brown eyes, Del knew; brown, with tiny little fires burning deep inside them.

They walked slowly, silent for a moment, her fingers tight on his arm. He was aware of her perfume, the clean, sweet smell of her hair.

"Del . . ."

"Yes?"

"Have you told Julie yet?"

"No."

"You should, you know."

"I tried tonight, but I couldn't."

She laughed softly. "You'll have to be stronger than that."

"She knows anyhow, Yvonne. She's known all along."

They turned the corner and started up Railroad Avenue.

"She can only know that we see each other," Yvonne said. "She couldn't possibly know that we're going away together."

"I think she does," Del said.

"Then tell her and make sure."

He thought of the way Julie had cried without tears.

"It won't be easy," he said.

She said nothing, but when they reached a deeply shadowed place on the boardwalk, she stopped and drew him to a stop beside her. "Kiss me, Del."

He stared at her.

"*Kiss* me!"

He took her in his arms and kissed her.

"Again, Del!"

He kissed her again. And suddenly there ws no control left in him, no realization of time or place. Desire consumed him, swift and demanding and somehow terrifying. And she answered him. Her mouth locked with his, and her fingers dug into his hard shoulders with a strength that completely amazed him.

He released her, feeling the pulse in his temples.

Yvonne laughed at him. "Do you want to kiss me again?"

He drew her to him once more. She was like a different girl. Her lips were soft and tender, and the tapering fingers that came up to touch his cheek were gentle and caressing.

"You really do want to marry me, don't you, Dell," she murmured.

HE STOOD back and rubbed the sweat from the palms of his hands.

"Maybe we'd better go back," he said.

She took his arm, and they turned back toward Flower Street. "We're going to be very happy, Del."

He shortened his steps so she could keep pace with him without hurrying.

She looked up at him, smiling. "But we've got to be practical about things. I believe in a man and woman being very frank with one another. Don't you?"

"When they can."

"This is once we're going to *have* to be, Del. I mean—well, there's the question of money. . . ."

"Money? That's no problem, Yvonne. There's plenty of it in the safe at the Domino."

"I'm glad. Life can be ugly without it. My first husband was a weakling, Del. When I divorced him back in Boston, I did it because I couldn't bear being married to a coward. He could have been a wealthy man. But no, *he* had to put other people first. He wasn't like you, Del. Not at all."

He ran his tongue across his lower lip. "You think not?"

"I know it! You're everything he was not. You're a fighter. You take what you want. With the right woman behind you, you could do *anything*. *We* can do anything, Del. You and I together!"

"And you still think San Francisco's the town for us?"

"A two-fisted man can make a fortune there." She was silent a moment. Then, "Del, exactly how much is in that safe?"

"About eleven thousand."

"Del! Are you serious?"

"Of course. Why?"

"I'd thought there would be more."

"I kept putting money back into the Domino," he told her. "Equipment costs a lot, Yvonne. And it costs a lot to haul it all the way down here to the border."

"I know. But what about the Domino itself, Del? Isn't that worth a lot of money?"

"Yes."

"Well, then?"

"The Domino will belong to Julie."

She stopped walking abruptly, staring up at him.

"You don't mean that!"

"I do mean it," he said. "It's the least I can do. It isn't nearly *enough*."

"You're still in love with that little—"

"Eleven thousand dollars, Yvonne," he said quietly. "No more."

It was if he had slapped her.

"Del, I . . . I can't believe that you're so weak!"

"Weak or not, a man has to live with himself."

"You want to marry me, Del. *You* know it, and *I* know it!"

"Any man would."

"Then, can't you see? A woman likes nice things, Del. Some women *have* to have nice things or they die!"

"People with eleven thousand dollars aren't paupers, Yvonne. Even in San Francisco."

She tossed her head angrily and began walking again, and this time she didn't take his arm. Neither of them spoke until they were at her gate.

"I'm sorry, Del," she said. "I'm not really a vicious woman. It's just that I had such wonderful plans for you. For *us*."

He opened the gate and then turned to face her. "And now?"

She ignored the question and stepped close to him. "I can't kiss you here, Del," she said softly. "Not right in front of the house. But I want to."

He stood there, vaguely ill at ease, watching the way the moonlight shimmered in the dark curls. Her face was more beautiful than he had ever seen it. In the magic of the moonlight, it was difficult to believe such breathtaking beauty could be real. Her perfume seemed stronger now. A sudden breeze had sprung up, and he

noted the way it molded the thin material of her dress against the curves of her figure. He looked briefly at the tiny, high-arched feet in their high-heeled French pumps and the slim, silken ankles above them.

He smiled at her. "I guess I'd better say goodnight."

She took his hand and squeezed it firmly. "Goodnight, Del."

DEL did not return to the Domino. He walked the dark streets for hours—until the sun came up. And by the time the townsfolk began to stir, Del Shannon's inner battle had been fought, and his thoughts and plans were clear and fixed.

He was the first customer at Luke Conway's jewelry shop. He bought a plain gold wedding ring, sizing it on the little finger of his left hand. It fitted the little finger snugly, and he left it there.

He was neither sleepy nor hungry, but he forced himself to eat steak and eggs, and then he stopped by the barber shop and sat impatiently in the chair while his favorite barber shaved him.

Out on the street, he passed the Bon-Ton, and he paused a moment, looking at the dresses there. There were two that caught his eye. One was high-necked and long-sleeved, and he thought of how this would be the one to appeal to Yvonne. The other dress had no top at all, a tightly gathered waist, and a form-hugging skirt. It was deep-blue—like Julie's eyes. He smiled a little, thinking how gloriously Julie could fill that dress. He went in and bought it and had it wrapped as a gift.

Moments later, he stepped from the bright morning sunlight into the cool dimness of the Domino, whistling softly, genuinely happy for the first time in weeks.

And then he saw the man who faced him across the big room—the man with the kill-fever in his eyes and the long-barreled Colt in his hand. The man was rising from a chair beside a deal table. He had been waiting for him, Del knew—waiting to kill him.

He said, "Billy, don't be a fool."

Billy Martin's young face was set hard. He straightened to his full height, his gun hand braced against his hip.

"I told you, Shannon," he grated between tight teeth. "I *told* you."

Suddenly the gift box under Del's left arm seemed to weigh a ton. This was the pay-off then. The other man held a Colt, and *he* held a blue dress wrapped in tissue paper and gay yellow ribbons! It was ironic, and yet, somehow, there was a certain justice in it.

"That's *one* gewgaw you won't be giving that damn Laurie woman," Billy told him.

Del lowered the box to a table top, making it slow and careful, never taking his eyes from Billy's.

"Listen to me, Billy," he said. "You—"

"Listen, hell! You're the one who should have listened. Did you think I was bluffing you, Shannon? Did you think I wouldn't kill you?" He shook his head slowly. "Mister, I'm going to blast your insides all over this saloon."

Del had known fear before. He knew it now. And there was sadness inside him, too, beneath the fear—sadness and regret that it had to end this way. He took a deep breath and did the thing he had always done when he had known fear. He acknowledged it and faced it. He had faced death from guns before, many times, and he was determined that *this* time would be no different.

He glanced about the room, wondering where the morning barkeep was, why he wasn't on duty.

"Don't look around for help," Billy said caustically. "I saw you coming and I told Barney you wanted to see him down the street. I even told him I'd watch the place for him."

Del felt the slow crawl of cold sweat along his ribs and down the insides of his arms.

"You're making a mistake, Billy," he said. "I know you think you're doing right. But you're not. Killing never solved anything."

"No? Listen, Shannon. I followed you last night. I cut back up the alley and trailed you when you went to meet that Laurie woman. I saw you two. I saw everything you did." He stepped closer to Del. "When you took her home, I figured you'd come back here. I got here first. I was going to kill you then. But you didn't show up. In fact you didn't show up all night!"

Talk was useless, Del knew. He stared at Billie, waiting for the blast of his Colt, waiting to have his belly torn out of his body.

And then he noticed the touch of sunlight on the brim of Billy's Stetson. The early morning sunlight slanted through the batwings. So far, only the front edge of Billy's hatbrim was in the sunlight—but if Billy took another step, the sunlight would be on his face, in his eyes. A man would blink; a man would *have* to blink in that sunlight.

Billy's boot moved forward. The slanting sunlight struck his hate-twisted face, and he momentarily faltered.

Del moved without thought, without feeling. The derringer was in his hand. It roared once, meeting the greater thunder of the Colt.

But he did not fire the derringer's second barrel. There was no need. Billy Martin wasn't even looking at him. He stood holding his right wrist with his left hand, tears of sudden pain filling his eyes. Slowly his fingers straightened and the Colt thudded to the sawdust covered floor. His mouth hung slack in wonder as he stared at the bright blood spurting from his wounded gun hand.

Del watched him a moment. There was pity in him now. And yet it had to happen; there had been no other way.

"You'd better get to the doc, Billy," he said tonelessly, his eyes on the bewildered kid before him.

Billy Martin's eyes came up to meet his. "You . . . you could have killed me—if you'd wanted to!"

"No," Del said. "I couldn't. It was your hand, or nothing."

He picked up the gift box, strode past him and climbed the stairs to his living quarters. Over his shoulder he called down to Billy. "There'll be a crowd in here on account of those shots. I'll leave the explaining up to you."

HE STEPPED into his room and closed the door behind him.

Julie ran to him, her eye frightened. "What was it? Those shots that I heard—what were—"

"Nothing for you to worry about," he said. "One gent just taught another a lesson. Neither one of them was hurt very bad."

"Oh."

She turned away from him and moved to the window and stood looking down into the alley behind the Domino. She stood quietly.

He said, "I bought something for you, Julie."

She turned and her eyes were bright. He gave her the package. She opened it eagerly, and then held the blue dress up in front of her, exclaiming over it like a delighted child. *God,* Del thought, *it takes so little to make her happy. . . .*

He said, "Put it on, Julie."

"You look the other way," she said, laughing.

He grinned and turned away. It had been close. Too close. A man could be an awful fool. He was Julie's world. He always would be. Whether he had a fortune or a single dollar bill, whether they were together in the luxury of the Domino or a one-room shack. She was happy with the dress, but he knew a smile would have made her just as happy. He tried to picture

Yvonne Laurie being excited about a blue dress, but that was impossible. Yvonne wanted him, yes—but only as a means to an end. She wanted him because of the things he could do for her, because of the fortune she thought he could win for her. She would have used him the same way some men used a sixgun—ruthlessly and tirelessly, until she got what she wanted. A fortune.

Del listened to the soft rustling sound of the dress as Julie wriggled into it. Fortune be damned! He had *his* fortune. Right here in this room.

"Now!" Julie said.

He turned—and for one of the few times in his life he felt a surge of embarrassment. The blue dress fitted Julie like a second skin, but it was cut far too low for a girl with her ripe young figure. She was lovely in it, of course. That was the whole trouble. She was *too* lovely. She was more revealed than concealed.

She saw the look in his eyes and she colored. "I'll just wear it up here," she said. "Just for you."

He moved toward her and worked the wedding band from the little finger of his left hand. He took Julie's own tiny hand in his and slipped the ring over her third finger.

"Just to see how it fits," he said, watching her closely.

The ring was easily three sizes too large. She had to hold her finger up in the air to keep the gold band from falling off. She stood absolutely motionless, staring at it, not even breathing, while the color drained from her cheeks, and her eyes grew dark and misty.

Del fidgeted from one foot to the other, looking first at the ring and then at Julie's rounded blue eyes. He felt awkward, helpless.

"That . . . that's just like a man," Julie managed. "He buys the dress too small and the ring too big!"

He took her in his arms.

"I guess the ring is a little big at that," he said. "Or maybe it's because your hand's so little."

He held her that way a long time. When she spoke again, her voice was very small, and her breath was moist and warm against his ear. "And . . . *Yvonne,* Del? What about her?"

"I don't know anyone by that name, Julie," he said. "Not any more." ★ ★ ★

RIDE CLEAR OF HANGMAN'S RANGE!

By GEORGE C. APPELL

From the grim, gray walls of prison, Wallace rode into the gunswept stronghold of Marvin Mannion, claiming he'd paid—with twenty years of his life—for half of Mannion County, and now he'd settle for cold cash—or Mannion's blood!

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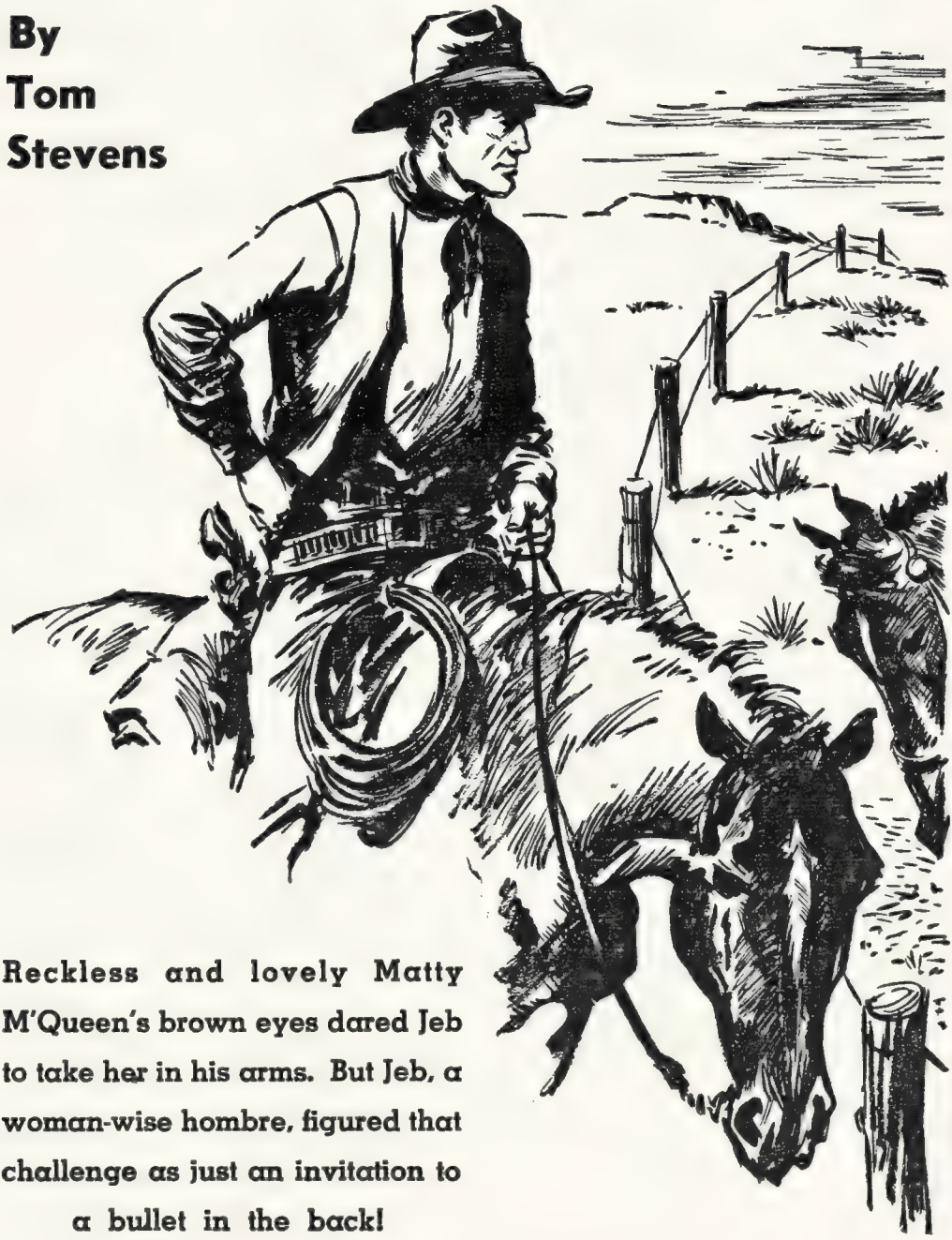

Reckless and lovely Matty M'Queen's brown eyes dared Jeb to take her in his arms. But Jeb, a woman-wise hombre, figured that challenge as just an invitation to a bullet in the back!

NEED TAMING!

"Nobody can sit on the fence in this war!"

FROM the top of the bluff the dusty, sunburnt rider gazed down at the sullen brown waters of the Big Sioux. He was a tall man with sensitive blue eyes and an indefinable air of gentle breeding. Somehow he did not belong here in the raw,

untamed Dakota Territory; he did not fit in with the barren, sunbaked land and the endless rolling hills and the vast burning expanse of the sky. His skin was broiled raw by the glare of the sun, and the clothes he wore, although obviously shaped to him from countless hours in the saddle, did not seem right on him. He was a man used to better things: to a less brutal land, to a less savage sun.

As his practiced eye searched along the twisting curve of the Big Sioux, Jeb Wharton thought to himself: *Well, it isn't the Mississippi, boy, but it's a wild little creek, and maybe she won't be tough to tame on a rampage!*

His eye followed the wide bend of the river along the edge of the bottoms ranch that stretched below him from the bluff to the river bank. A flood would leave that whole section of land under water—except for seventy-five yards where the land sloped gently up to meet the bluff. And that would be too small a stretch to hold the cattle that grazed now in the short grama grass below him. That, mused Wharton, is what a man gets for buying a pig in a poke.

With a sigh he pulled out a bag of tobacco and rolled himself a smoke, his back ramrod-stiff in the saddle. Even with a sack of tobacco and a paper in his hand, he did not look like a true cowman. There was a hint of gentility and sensitivity to him that nothing could stamp out—not the backdrop of barren Dakota soil, nor the raging heat of the sun.

The clatter of hoofs and a gruff command to *whoa* brought Jeb Wharton around in the saddle, staring into the sun at the pair of riders approaching the barbed wire fence at his back. Through the fence he could see a big-bellied, bald-headed gent with a red face, a pair of snow-white sideburns, and a scowl that brought his bushy eyebrows down over his eyes. He bounced up and down on the horse like a sack of cotton bolls, and the perspiration poured down off his bald pate and dripped off his beetling brows. Crooked in his right arm was a rifle, which he kept patting nervously.

Accompanying him on a spirited Indian pony was a young girl, about twenty, with a coil of dark hair wadded up on the back of her head, a calico skirt, a white shirtwaist, and a doll-like face with big brown eyes, a pug nose, and a shrewd, calculating look.

The puffy gent was saying: "My God, Matty, more of 'em!" He glowered at Wharton. "You must be a new one," he growled. "I haven't seen you yet."

Wharton lifted his cigarette to his mouth and dragged off it. He smiled, a slow, deliberate smile. "Why, I haven't seen you before, either," he said in his soft, unmistakable Mississippi accent. His eyes glanced to the girl. They softened, and for a moment, his smile meant something more than politeness. "And I do declare, seeing you now is a total pleasure."

The girl's face showed she liked that, but the old boy's red cheeks got redder. "Leave my daughter out of this," he rasped, his brows diving down in the center. "You're dealing with me."

Wharton eyed the fat man through the barbed wire fence. "For now," he agreed. He was thinking of the shrewd, calculating look in the eyes of the old boy's daughter. It wasn't hard to tell who really had the last word in that family. "What's your name, mister?"

The fat man got out a handkerchief and blotted the top of his head. "'Queen," he said. "Don't tell me you never heard of me."

"Should I have?"

Down came the big boy's eyebrows again, and the glower sent sparks out at Wharton. Only a windbag or a fool would take offense that Wharton had never heard of him. This windbag's horse moved under him slightly, and he rocked back and forth. "How much do I have to pay you?" he asked irritably.

Wharton said: "Pay me to what?"

"To haul your freight, damn it! Name your price, drifter. I pay good money."

Wharton said nothing. He stared a long time at the red-faced rider across the wire fence from him. An uneasy air of enmity and silence hung between the two of them for a moment. Here was an impatient man with an uneasy fear gnawing inside at him, Jeb Wharton reasoned. It would be best to play this close to the chest.

THE girl turned her head and spoke slowly, with a tinge of gentle persuasion in her voice. How many times she must have used that tone to wheedle things from her old man, Wharton thought. And how many times she must have gotten just what she wanted.

"Dad," she said. "Did it ever occur to you that you might have made a mistake?"

M'Queen shook his head and growled. "Hush, Matty."

Wharton spoke up quietly. "You have made a mistake."

M'Queen moved his horse toward the barbed wire fence. Here he leaned forward and glared at Jeb Wharton from close range. "I can tell a hired gun when I see one. I'll double what Walt Alden paid."

Wharton's cigarette burned up and he flung it into the dust. "There's no deal. I'm no gunman. I didn't even know there was a war on. I'm the new owner of the Walking A."

That set the fat old boy back in the saddle. His horse, shuddering from the impact, moved restlessly. The old boy stuck his neck forward like a turkey sighting the axe coming at him. "Walt Alden pulled out?" he gasped incredulously.

Wharton let a ghost of a smile creep over his face. "No, not pulled out. Walt Alden crapped out. I outdrew him in a St. Louis poker game. It'll take more than dynamite to move me, M'Queen. War or no war, I'm settling in."

M'Queen sat in his saddle digesting this last piece of information. He pursed his lips, beetled his brows, wiped the sweat off his head. Then he moved his hand over his pants leg, and leaned forward. A crafty look came into his eye. He said, in friendly, unctuous tones: "Well, maybe we can dicker. I want that bottoms land, for my own protection. I'll buy you out, lock, stock and gun barrel for twice what you won from Alden."

Wharton let a big smile come out on his face. It was a smile reserved for business and polite refusals. "I'm a funny bird, M'Queen. I made up my mind to settle, and now nothing can budge me."

M'Queen's eyebrows went up a bit, and Wharton could look directly into the unfriendly eyes. "A shooting war is brewing between me and the bottoms ranchers. It's only fair to warn you. You bought yourself trouble, drifter." M'Queen clamped his jaw hard, and started to turn his horse away from the fence, acting pleased with the sound of his last words.

The girl turned her face toward Jeb Wharton, but spoke to her father. There was an undercurrent of coquetry in her glance. "I don't know, Dad," she said slowly. "You haven't given him a chance to show his true colors. Why don't you try him and see?"

M'Queen thought that over for a moment, decided it appealed to him, and then brought up a rusty smile out of the depths of his barrel-like interior—about as friendly a smile as a cornered cougar's. "We don't like to be bad neighbors here in the Dakota Territory. Why not be friends?"

Wharton turned, looked at Matty M'Queen, a crooked smile appearing on his face. "The very closest of friends," he said with mock gallantry. His smile vanished, and he turned to M'Queen. "I don't intend to choose sides in any cattle war, mister, no matter who I sympathize with. I fought four years in one lollapalooza of a war, and I don't have the stomach for it."

The old boy brought his horse up close to the barbed wire. "Nobody can sit on the fence in this war. You're with us, or you're against us."

Matty M'Queen's eyes narrowed. "Wait a minute, Dad," she said quickly. "If he does sit on the fence, that's fine with us. And if he doesn't, we can take care of him the way we took care of the rest!" She finished her statement and sat looking directly at Jeb Wharton. Her eyes belied her implied threat, for in them Wharton could read a challenge and a dare—a dare for him to come and take her in his arms. Her eyes and his locked for a long moment, and a strong stir of emotion rose in him.

He nodded affably. "I'll be waiting for you to try."

M'Queen, seemingly oblivious to what was passing between his daughter and his new neighbor, bounced angrily up and down in the saddle, and his horse shuddered under the impact. Sweat rolled off M'Queen's eyebrows, and the eyebrows rode down over his eyes. "We'll know the minute you start picking sides, Wharton."

Wharton laughed, an impulse to pull the tiger's tail strong in him. "Why, I bet you will. I'll bet you've both had your noses in my business from the minute I set foot in the Territory."

M'Queen wheeled his horse and said, "Come on Matty. This saddlebum wants none of our good will."

Matty M'Queen's face showed sudden anger. Her eyes blazed at Wharton; her hands clenched the reins. Her mouth was a slash of angry red. "And we want none of his good will! I wait the day, Wharton," she cried, "when they string you up to the nearest oak!"

With a thunder of hoofs Matty M'Queen and Old Man M'Queen rode away from the barbed wire fence, leaving Jeb Wharton in a cloud of dust. *Why, this is a right friendly little place to settle down,* Wharton thought to himself.

Walt Alden had built the Walking A ranch house out of weathered boards and logs, and it looked pretty much as if someone had tied it all together with baling wire. A high wind had ripped some of the roof off, and even from outside Wharton could see the sunlight filtering in through the cracks. It wasn't, Wharton mused, much like Blue Gables, the plantation home he'd once owned down in Mississippi. But then, how could it be, with no one to take care of it?

JEB WHARTON rode into the barn, slid from his horse, and lifted the saddle off and threw it in the corner. He led the horse to a stack of hay and then turned toward the ranch house. As he emerged from the barn, a strange, leathery face appeared in the big open window at the side of the house. The face had some resemblance to a human countenance—but not much. It looked more like a caricature of a longhorn steer. The man had a wide, drooping red handlebar mustache, cavernous eyes, yellow-stained teeth, and a mashed-in chin. He was about fifty years old, and had a tuft of orange hair on his head, which contributed to his strange appearance.

Jeb Wharton walked over to the house and gazed in at the apparition. The apparition gazed back at him with unblinking, watery blue eyes. Then he moved his mouth, chawing some cut plug. He drooled tobacco juice, and then spat some onto the floor of the ranch house with a loud plop.

"Howdy, stranger," said Wharton. "You come with the place?"

"Reckon so. Who are you?"

"The new boss. Jeb Wharton."

The apparition wiped his hand on his jeans, and stuck out a gnarled, twisted mockery of a hand over the window sill. "I'm Dusty."

Wharton shook the hand, then wiped his own on his pants. "By God, you are at that. I take it you were Walt Alden's right-hand man."

The apparition chewed some, ruminated, and said, "You said, 'were.' Did Walt Alden cash in his chips?"

Wharton shook his head. "Didn't have any chips left to cash in. I won the Walking A in a poker game."

Dusty mumbled something and nodded his head. "Damned fool never did know how to play. Well, you've seen me. I've seen you. What's your decision?"

Wharton peered into the darkened ranch house and looked the gnarled creature up and down. He had on puncher's jeans and long-handled red underwear. His knees were knobby, his elbows stuck out like handlebars. He was one hell of a sight.

"You're hired. One condition, though. You got to promise to wear a hat so I won't mistake you for one of the longhorns."

"Okay, funny boy. You're from Mississippi, ain't you?"

"Yeah. Mississippi. What about you?"

"Georgia. You'd never believe it. It's been so long ago the drawl has plumb wore thin."

Wharton paused and then said slowly, glancing back up at the wire fence on the bluff. "I want to know about this M'Queen and his daughter Matty."

Dusty twisted off a hunk of cut plug and inserted it skilfully in his mouth. "Now there is one dandy stack of Taos lightning."

Jeb Wharton nodded. "What was the fight about—between M'Queen and Walt Alden?"

"That damned fence. See how it runs along the bluff?" The gnarled old reprobate pointed a finger along the top of the cliff. "Cuts off the whole bottoms area. Runs straight across, throttling the breath out of all the bottoms ranchers here. Now, no cowman in his right mind uses barbed wire—less'n he's got some deviltry afoot. And our only outlet in summer for our stock is down south at Soapy Simpson's speard. So you figure it out."

Jeb Wharton nodded. "Does that fool windbag think he can close out these ranchers and grab their land?"

"He's big, and he's afraid of honest competition. He figures the bottoms men will leave if they get wiped out."

Wharton mused, "Wiped out by the river?"

Dusty looked startled. "River never floods."

"Rivers always flood," Wharton said. "What do we do when we can't get our cattle up out of the bottoms here?"

Dusty shrugged his bony shoulders in the long-handled red underwear. "Drive down through Soapy's. Flood ain't never happened."

"Get ready for it to happen," Jeb Wharton said softly. "I've lived on the biggest river of them all for twenty-five years. I can tell when water means to flood. Look at that damned river: yellow-brown and roily. It's going to flood."

The old cowpuncher clucked his teeth. "I'll rassle up some chuck, boy. You come in and sit down. Got to rest up for the big meeting tonight."

Jeb Wharton glanced sharply at the old man. "Meeting? Bible class, anti-saloon league, or barn-raising?"

Dusty spat loudly on the floor. "Hell-raising, more likely. It's a war party. At Montague's next door. That damned Easterly's figuring on stampeding the bottoms ranchers into open war on M'Queen."

Wharton shrugged. "Don't care to mix in it. I came up here to Dakota to settle down. And I didn't mean six feet down."

Dusty looked at him, his watery old eyes amused but tolerant. "You'll come." He lifted a hand, wiped his mouth off. "In Dakota, boy, we hang together, or we hang high."

Wharton sighed, thinking about the nice days before wars, before reconstruction, before barbed wire. . . .

Montague's that night was full of cigar smoke, low-keyed talk, and high-keyed men.

They were whispering before the meeting began, and Jeb Wharton could catch an urgency and a tension in their manner. Montague, a tall, lean, weary man with a long nose and a pair of eyes like a whipped beagle's, finally rose and called the meeting to order, introduced Jeb Wharton, and then went on: "If the latest bad news ain't got to you yet, here it is. M'Queen's bought up Soapy Simpson's land and strung a fence across it. We're boxed in. We got to figure some way out. Meeting's declared open."

BEHIND WHARTON, a man stood up, pushing his way forward until he stood in the center of the room. He was a barrel-chested man, with heavy shoulders and heavy arms. His neck had sunk down into his body, until his head seemed to be part of his chest. He wore his hair cut short and stiff after the fashion of the military. His face was dark blue around his jaw, his skin swarthy. His eyes smouldered with a continual bitterness. He wore a short-clipped mustache that covered the sardonic sneer of his lip. His movements were tense, taut, and electric. Rashness and impatience ran heavy in him, underlying his every action. He wanted power, a name, and wealth—and he wanted them the easy way. There was no waiting and biding his time for Ben Easterly.

"We'll cut that fence of Soapy's," Easterly snarled in a low voice, "and we'll drive our cows through where we always did. If M'Queen wants his war, he'll get it!"

Jeb Wharton, who had vowed to lay low through this discussion and through all this fence trouble, found himself on his feet, gazing across the room at this embittered man. "Have you ever been in a shooting war, mister?"

Easterly's face went dark, and he focused his black eyes on Wharton. "No man can set himself up as a king. M'Queen *will* be king if we don't call his damned bluff!"

Jeb Wharton glanced swiftly about him at the room full of men. Dusty had been right: Easterly meant to stampede this group into a full-scale range war. And it was obvious that these two-bit ranchers weren't ready for war.

"There's lots of ways to skin a cat," Wharton said slowly. "When you need a man's help, it's no time to let a grudge get out of hand. I'm for negotiating with M'Queen. I think he'll let us push our cows through his land if we work him right."

Easterly had been watching Wharton carefully, his eyes glowing brightly behind his heavy black eyebrows. Now he pushed himself forward so that he was standing in front of the tall Mississippian. He spoke to the room at large in a sly, patronizing tone. "The minute I got into this room tonight, gents, I asked myself: 'Who's this new man Wharton?' Maybe you asked the same thing. 'How'd he come to buy into Walt Alden's ranch?' I figure you asked that, too. Now, I will ask you, Wharton, the question that bothered me then, and bothers me now. How much did M'Queen pay you to grab Walt Alden's land and come to spy on us?"

Dead silence hung over the smoke-filled room. Wharton felt the anger pound through him, felt the desire to fight tremble briefly in him, and while he fought down his swelling rage, he heard the tired man behind the table up front come to his feet with a bang and raise his voice in a shout: "Shut up and sit down, both of you. Damn it, we're not going to squabble among ourselves. Gents, I suggest we follow the lead of the young man of the Walking A. Get up a committee and speak to M'Queen tomorrow. Any opposition?"

"Me!" shouted Ben Easterly, but his enraged voice was a lone cry.

"Carried, damn it," snapped Montague. "Jeb Wharton, pick a man and negotiate with McQueen tomorrow." Montague stared about the men in his house, and said, in a softer voice, "The Missus has made

some coffee in the kitchen. Soon's we get these cigars smoked up in here, we been invited to mosey out there for refreshments. Meeting's over."

CHAPTER TWO

The Flood

NEXT morning Jeb Wharton awoke slowly, and lay there listening to the thin drum of rain on the roof. Then, with a start, he remembered the surly, threatening waters of the Big Sioux, and the trouble with the fence, and the meeting with M'Queen. He jumped out of bed, dressed, and hurried out into the rain to look at the river.

Dusty, with water dripping off his poncho and mustache, looked like a drowned longhorn. He stood staring out into the drizzle, chewing his cut plug, cussing monotonously and colorfully at the water. Already the muddy current was turbulent and swelling dangerously. He turned when Wharton came up and said: "This is unusual weather, Wharton. Heavy mountain dew."

"It's always unusual weather in Dakota. Where are the cattle?"

Dusty spat into the soggy grass and cussed again. "Out back. I pushed them up on the slope soon's I woke up."

"What got you up so early?"

Dusty's face reddened, and his moustache worked up and down impatiently. "Damned water dripping onto my face, that's what. Never took time to mend up his roofs, that good-for-nothing Walt Alden."

Jeb Wharton stared off toward the river. In no time at all, that rambunctious river would be boiling up over the low bank, and all the acreage of the bottoms land would be under water. "All right. Where are the sandbags, Dusty? We haven't got much time."

Dusty stared unbelievingly into Wharton's eyes. "We got less time than that. There ain't a sandbag in a hundred miles."

Jeb Wharton's mouth sagged open. "What do you do in a flood?"

Dusty spat again, nervously. "River never floods," he muttered dogmatically. "This is the driest country in the world." —his watery eyes surveyed Wharton lugubriously—"except, naturally, when it's the wettest."

Wharton fought down a bitter comment about desert farmers working river ranches, and turned back to the house. He came face to face with Bill Montague, riding up on his horse. Montague was dressed in a slicker and a beat-up campaign hat, and his face looked gray as a ghost's. His whole attitude was that of a man robbed blind in a crooked poker game.

"Light and set," Wharton grunted. Montague brought his horse in under the eaves of the Walking A's rickety ranch house, and jumped off. He hunkered down under the dripping boards and stared dispiritedly out toward the river.

"That damned M'Queen," Montague muttered wearily.

Wharton stared at Montague. "That's a fool thing to say. What's M'Queen got to do with the Big Sioux flooding?"

"River used to run through his valley. He dammed it off and sent it through here." Montague's tired hound-dog eyes looked up at Wharton and Dusty. "Oh hell," he sighed, "it ain't M'Queen's fault. River used to flow both places, and he was smart enough to turn it out of that valley. It just seems like all trouble starts with him."

Jeb Wharton hunkered down beside Montague. "We're going to get our cows out of here, Monty. Drive your cattle over on the slope where ours are. From there we'll take them onto M'Queen's land, soon's I talk to him."

A flicker of hope kindled in Montague's eyes, but quickly died. His beagle eyes stared tiredly at Wharton. "Listen," he said, his voice shaky, his eyes bright. "In

Indiana it was rust in the wheat. In Iowa, it was weevils in the corn. In Dakota, it's floods in a desert." Montague's voice broke, his body shook, and he gave an agonized, animal-like cry. "Man, it ain't anybody's fault but mine! It's me. That's what this whole thing's happening for. It's me—I'm what's the matter. I been pushed and shoved from hell to breakfast, and I always will be! By rust, by weevils, by floods . . ."

His voice cracked, and a high-pitched sob came from his throat. Wharton turned quickly and smashed his flat open palm onto Montague's leathery contorted face. Montague whipped back, tunned, and then his eyes came up bright and clear. He let his glance drop slowly away from Wharton's impassive, rock-like face. "Sorry," he whispered.

"No man gets anything from the land unless he fights for it," Wharton snapped. "We're going to fight and win! Get your cattle up there on my slope. I'm going down to warn the rest of the ranchers. We'll pile up the whole herd next to M'Queen's fence on my land. He'll let us through when he sees it's life or death for us."

The old maverick Dusty gazed solemnly at Wharton with his watery sun-faded eyes, and hitched up his soggy jeans. "You're a hell-for-leather combination—hard heart, soft head." He spat disgustedly into the grama grass. "Let's get at them cows of yours, Monty."

Wharton grabbed his poncho and hat, saddled up and rode swiftly down along the river-bank, following the bend of the river. He spoke quickly to three of the ranchers on the way, telling them to move their cows up on his land near the fence. The rain continued to pour down on him, and, as he galloped along the embankment, his horse shied from a rapidly spreading pool of muddy, turbulent water boiling up from a hole in the ground. Pressure from the river had already forced the water up through a thin membrane of earth. Down in Mississippi they called these sand boils. It meant that soon now the whole river would be spreading out across the flat surface of the bottoms.

SQUINTING through the slanting sheets of rain, Wharton made out Ben Easterly's crew to the rear of the ranch, hazing the water-soaked and bewildered cows back up toward the steep curtain of the bluff. At the south end of Easterly's land, Wharton could see the brand new wire fence separating Easterly's spread from Soapy Simpson's old place.

Easterly's body stiffened in the saddle as he spotted Wharton. He moved slowly away from his cattle, and loped casually through the rain toward Wharton, his horse kicking up jets of water from the saturated earth.

"Come down to gloat?" he asked abruptly, reining up, his dark face flushed.

"Come down to help," Wharton snapped. "Where do you aim to park your cows?"

A sneer stirred Easterly's lip. "I'll hang 'em to the bluff by their tails. You got any better idea?"

"Run 'em up to the rear of my land. I've got room."

Easterly's dark pig-like eyes narrowed. "You and M'Queen finally worked out some way to grab off my herd?" His swarthy face moved close to Wharton's.

Wharton pulled his soggy hat down over his forehead with an angry, blind gesture, spun his horse in the mud, and galloped off. A moment later he heard a shout from Easterly. "Hey, Wharton, I've got news for you. About M'Queen."

Wharton reined up and faced back toward Easterly. A smug expression crept over Easterly's dark, glistening face. "If you're planning some kind of a deal with M'Queen concerning your cows, Wharton, drop it."

"What's happened?" said Wharton, moving closer to Easterly, not liking the nasty, triumphant look in his eyes.

"Sort of an accident," Easterly drawled. "Sort of a shooting accident."

"What do you mean?"

"I come riding back to my spread right after the meeting, and seen somebody skulking along the fence yonder." Easterly thrust a hand out toward Soapy Simpson's fence. "I investigated—might of been rustlers, y'know—and I seen this shadow moving back and forth. Like any red-blooded American, I sang out to him to identify himself and state his business."

Easterly rubbed his jaw with his hand. "I called out and got my answer. A bushwhack shot that'd like to of laid me in my grave. What could I do but fire back? I done it, and blowed this bushwhacker plumb out of his saddle. Wandered over there in the dark and struck a sulphur match. I'd nicked the gent in the shoulder. Left him lay there and beat a hasty retreat."

Wharton's throat was dry. "Who was it?"

"Henley. Russ Henley."

"Who's he? Where's he range?"

"Lazy Q," Easterly said in surprise. "Henley is M'Queen's foreman, as if you didn't know. Skulking around along Soapy's fence like a damned spy, he was! Serves him right he got plugged. Damned shame he didn't die. Couple of the Lazy Q hands come riding up later and hauled him off. They must of heard the shots."

Finally Wharton found his voice. He rode near Easterly. "I ought to put a bullet in your guts, man," he said. "You've lost us all our cows, as sure as you're sitting on top that horse grinning like a damned fool."

Easterly's eyes narrowed. He spat on the ground with a soggy splat. "If he don't let us through onto dry land, we blast our way through him, Wharton! Hell, it's in the books that way! What happened last night makes our course damned clear!"

Jeb Wharton kept his eyes on Easterly's swarthy face for several moments without speaking, eyeing him coldly. Easterly's glance finally wavered, and he said: "Thanks for the notion about my cows. I'll drive them over to the Walking A."

Wharton spun around on his horse and tore along the land toward the Walking A again without a glance behind him. . . .

The river was spreading out jagged fingers of brown into the grass and earth. Rain sizzled down on the surface; it tore at his poncho, dashed rain in his eyes, soaked through his boots. His horse splashed through puddles, dancing aside, whirling back, rising in sudden fear, pulling away again. Wharton saw the flat mirror of water lapping up toward his ramshackle ranch house.

In the rear, Walking A cattle huddled on the hillside, and in the middle of them rode Dusty, chewing, cursing, spitting, wiping his wet mustache and waving his hat to beat back a steer heading into the soggy earth. Wharton saw Montague's cattle there, too, and the herds of the other ranchers. Montague, worried as a hound dog with a bee in his ear, rode out to meet him.

"M'Queen's riders are patrolling the fence," said Montague. "Is somethiing wrong? They're loaded for bear."

Jeb Wharton gritted his teeth. "We be the bear, Monty. It's Easterly's doing. He took a pot shot at M'Queen's foreman, Henley, last night. Winged him.

"That damned Easterly," grunted Montague. "He always did have an itch for shooting. Well, he's finally ruined us, this time."

WHARTON looked over the heads of the herd, and saw the Lazy Q riders meandering back and forth between the posts along the stretch of barbed wire. They wore their slickers, and, under their slickers, they carried their rifles, at ready.

Dusty, noticing the two of them talking, rode through the cattle toward them. "Them Lazy Q boys don't seem too friendly," he remarked, taking off his hat and

wiping his head with a handkerchief. "You still intend to parley with M'Queen?" The watery blue eyes stared sharply at Wharton, watching closely.

Wharton rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "No."

Montague whipped a startled glance at Wharton. "You said you'd parley, Wharton. By God, if you intend to fight now, without trying to settle this thing sensibly . . ."

Jeb Wharton grinned. "When you're shooting a buffalo, you don't put the bullet in his tail, do you? You aim for the heart."

Montague remained unenlightened. "So?"

"M'Queen isn't the heart of the Lazy Q."

Montague shook his head. "You ain't talking sense, Wharton. If he ain't, who is?"

Dusty said nothing, but stroked his red handlebar mustaches, chewed cut plug, and kept his eyes on Wharton.

Wharton said, "In New Orleans there's an old French proverb going like this: *Cherchez la femme.* It means look for the woman. Naturally these Frenchmen are always looking for women, anyway, but that isn't the point. The way I see it, it's Matty M'Queen who runs Lazy Q—not with a whip and an iron hand, but with her tongue." Wharton turned for confirmation to Dusty. "Am I right, Dusty?"

Dusty rubbed his chin, ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth and spat. It was as close as he ever got to a direct "Yes."

Montague shook his head. "Maybe so. But she's the toughest gal in these parts—and a damned sight smarter than Old Man M'Queen. How do you intend to use her?"

"Down in Mississippi I had a sister, Monty," Wharton said. "She was beautiful, headstrong, and spoiled rotten. She'd play with men like toys. She'd blink her eyes, move her hips, look at them invitingly, and she had every man in eight counties taking up guitar playing to serenade her."

Montague nodded. "Sounds like Matty M'Queen all right."

"She played them all for suckers—drawing them in, daring them to challenge her. And then when they snapped at the bait, she'd laugh like hell, and drop them. And they'd turn pale, whine like lost pups, and take their guitars where the playing was appreciated."

Montague frowned. "I don't see what that proves."

"Know what finally happened to her, Monty? Big fellow from Indiana, name of Fairchild, with a head like a big red cabbage and arms the size of tree trunks, came to our place one day to clear off some trees. Annabelle tried the same tease on this Fairchild, and he made a pass at her. She whirled off, gay as a lark, but this Fairchild laughed, followed, and caught her. She screamed, but he laughed some more. She slapped him, clawed at him, yelled her head off. Fairchild slapped her hard, once, and told her to quiet down."

Wharton looked at Dusty and Montague, and said, in a soft voice. "Boys, she minded. When Fairchild left town, she followed him. She gave up everything she had—and she had plenty in those days—for this big red-headed monkey. Why? Because all the time she was teasing these young bucks, she really wanted somebody to boss her around—not somebody to bow and scrape in front of her."

Montague chewed his lip. "Glad you know all about women, Wharton. I'm damned thankful it ain't me going after Matty M'Queen."

Dusty stuck out his hand. "If we don't never see you again, Wharton, it's been extraordinary knowing you."

Wharton laughed and turned his horse along the barbed wire fence. Some three hundred yards down along the bluff, and out of sight of the patrolling riflemen, there was an entrance to the Lazy Q. . . .

The rain slowed up, and a shaft of sun-

shine crept through the clouds above. As Wharton galloped down the road to M'Queen's ranch house in the middle of the valley, he saw the girl riding out toward him. Matty M'Queen wore a slicker and a wide-brimmed hat to shed the water that at present was not coming down. She rode up swiftly, her level eyes appraising him steadily.

"You must wear a rabbit's foot, Wharton. I see nobody took a shot at you yet."

Wharton jumped off his horse, and tied it to a cottonwood tree by the roadway. "I came to talk to your father," he lied glibly.

She hopped off her pony and ground-reined it. She stood in front of Wharton, diminutive, trim, and attractive in the glistening slicker. Her face was composed, and a hint of interest flickered in the depths of her eyes.

"I hoped you'd come to see me," she smiled sunnily.

He shook his head quickly. "Whatever interest could I have in you, Miss M'Queen? Or in any other woman, for that matter?"

Anger crossed her eyes for an instant. But she recovered quickly and took a deep breath. "You cattlemen never seem to go in for women much, do you?"

His eyes opened wide in surprise. "Only as a pastime, Miss M'Queen. After hours. Never in the line of duty."

Her lips set firmly. "What do you want to see Dad about?"

He smiled faintly, turning back toward his horse. "It couldn't concern you less, Miss M'Queen. Strictly man talk. Cows and fences."

She moved quickly around in front of him, and put her hand on his chest, lightly and persuasively. "Don't be too hasty, Wharton. Perhaps I have some influence with my father. If you'd tell me what you want . . ."

He looked down at her, his eyes impatient, his voice curt. "Has nothing to do with you, Miss M'Queen. Now if you'll get out of my way, I'd like to board that horse of mine."

Her voice was firmer, stronger. "My word carries a lot of weight with my father, Wharton. Suppose you tell me what you want."

He stared at her face, at her angry eyes, at her restless mouth, at her vibrant, trim figure. He shrugged. "It's about using your land for our cows. The flood will drown them if we don't get out."

NOW that he had stated his problem, her eyes changed. Now that she had made him come to her for a favor, her eyes were amused, contemptuous. Her attitude was one of triumph and arrogance. She laughed. "That would be quite impossible, Wharton. After the shooting of Mr. Henley, that would be quite impossible."

He stared at her a moment, and then placed his hand on her shoulder and shoved her aside. She backed off, almost stumbled, and cried out in anger. Then she flew back at him.

"You can't go see him!" she screamed. "I won't let you!"

Wharton looked her up and down, a raking, contemptuous glance. "Why not?"

"He won't let you graze on his land Can't you understand that?"

Jeb Wharton's voice was soft. "I want to see him."

Her brown eyes blazed wide, and the blood rushed into her face, coloring her freckles and giving her skin a lively glow. "No!"

Wharton looked at her steadily for some ten seconds, and then leaned down and took her face in his hands and kissed her firmly on the mouth. Her lips trembled for an instant, and she returned the kiss warmly—for a moment. Then she flew out of his arms with an outraged cry.

Wharton stood stolidly before her, his arms dangling at his sides, his mouth flat and expressionless. "You've been asking

for that ever since the first time you saw me," he said slowly. "Enjoy it?"

She screamed something unintelligible at him, and then came at him, a hellcat with her claws out, a tigress defending herself. Wharton stood his ground for a moment, letting her claw at his face, and tear at his poncho. Then he grabbed her by the shoulders, hard, and lifted his right hand suddenly to slap her flat on the side of the face.

The girl stood, stunned, unbelieving, the tears coming to her eyes, the blood rushing first away from the spot his palm had touched, and then coming back slowly to color it crimson. Her lips trembled, and she lifted a hand to her face. Her eyes were blank and expressionless. And slowly, as she stood there watching his face, the expression came back into them. It was an expression of awe, hurt pride, and amazing discovery.

Abruptly she turned on her heel, mounted her pony, and galloped off into the drizzle, which was beginning again. Jeb Wharton watched her go, and wondered at the ease with which he had knotted his own hangrope. . . .

The herd had pressed tightly up to the Walking A wire now, and the hides of the cows were sleek and gleaming in the rain. Bucking through the tight mass of scared cattle, Wharton burst through to freedom finally, and found himself a foot deep in swirling, sucking Big Sioux water. He could see to Montague's spread; it was completely inundated. So were the spreads further on south; as was Easterly's. The Walking A was three-quarters gone, and the water kept coming. Soon the swirling tide would begin carrying away cows on the slope here, for there was no place for them to go.

Shortly the river would stretch from bluff to bluff—a solid and predatory mass of sliding, eddying current, carrying everything with it.

Tight-pressed, the cows were struggling against the barbed thorns of the fence. Bleeding, frightened, hopeless, those closest to the wire twisted and fought, trying to find free footing. One fell under the wire, tying its neck in the lethal barbs and strangling itself. The weight of the cattle behind it thrust in on it, trampling it into the soggy earth. The massive weight of the cattle surged back and forth, testing the wire, trying the fence posts, and the guards on M'Queen's side backed up warily, prepared with their guns to throw off any invasion.

By now the Big Sioux had eaten into one corner of the group of cows. As Wharton watched he saw a half dozen cows stumbling, twisting and turning, going under in the churning water. A cowhand rode out into the three-foot water, tossing a lasso out toward one of the upended critters, but the slashing virulent current threw his pony off balance, and he, too, almost went over into the boiling water.

The cows were only gray struggling heaps now, and the Big Sioux caught them and drew them steadily out into the middle of the widening channel of water. And then they were gone.

The cowhand rode back toward the herd on dryland, yelling "Hi-yah! Hi-yah!" and swung the loose rope at the cows on the edge of the herd. Several of those had been gazing out at him stupidly, made an effort to join their less fortunate companions.

"What happened between you and Queen M'Queen, boy?" Dusty asked, riding up, and wallowing his favorite food in his mouth.

Wharton grinned. "I either struck pay dirt or laid an egg. Have to wait for the pay-off."

Dusty preened his handlebars. "We got enough to take that crew of M'Queen's, ain't we? Just in case we got to."

"We've got eleven."

"Ten, lacking Easterly."

Jeb Wharton looked surprised. "Lacking Easterly? Where'd gundog Easterly take himself off to?"

"I didn't take compass readings. Last I seen of him he was headed upstream, along the fence. Had the air of a cat that had just et a big fat mouse."

"What's up north, Dusty?"

Dusty spat onto the rump of a steer nearby. Upstream, up north, boy, is fence, bluff, and the Big Sioux. Nothing more I can think of."

CHAPTER THREE

Gun-Meeting

SUDDENLY another handful of cattle bolted for the deceptive freedom of the wide open river. Twenty cows in all they were, stampeding blindly for more room and better grazing conditions. They stampeded into the Big Sioux, and before they had gone far, they found grazing room aplenty, wide open space, and their own happy hunting grounds. Jeb Wharton watched them bitterly as they somersaulted and spun downstream. He realized, with a surge of almost pleasant anger, that this was the last straw. This was the push that made a man choose his side.

He said, slowly, "Round up the boys, Dusty. We're going to take that fence." Dusty turned and stared at him, and then rode off into the rain without comment. His watery blue eyes seemed to take fire, and the wire-like bristles of his red mustaches stood straight out in defiance. In seven minutes he was back—with all the men.

"Here's what we do," Wharton said softly. "Dusty, you and one of the men move up through the herd and approach the fence. Draw out one of those rifle guards. While they're all looking at you, Montague and I will close in on the fence post and cut the wires. The rest of you can move the cattle through toward the fence. Bullets will pop, but with luck, nobody'll get hurt."

Montague sucked his hollow cheeks in, looked more hang-dog than ever, and nodded his head sadly. Then he took a deep breath, as if it might be his last one, and pulled his hat down tight on his forehead, steeling his mind against any change he might want to make later.

Dusty and one cowhand were fifty feet up the fence when Wharton and Montague began pushing their way through the pack. The rest of the bottoms ranchers spread out among the herd, falling in at strategic points. Wharton reached down and felt the wire-cutters in his saddle bag with his left hand, and then touched the .44 on his hip with his right hand.

They reached the fence. All the riflemen were standing with their backs to the fence, staring out into the rain. They were watching two dim shapes in the distance. It was M'Queen and his daughter, sitting their horses, gesticulating angrily at each other. Then suddenly Matty M'Queen broke away from her father, and raced for the fence. Standing there, they could see her face. It was dark with anger.

M'Queen thundered up on his own horse, cutting in front of her so that he stood between her and the fence. The riflemen at the posts fidgeted uncertainly and fingered their weapons.

"Get back to the house," M'Queen thundered, his body jumping up and down on his rain-soaked, overworked horse. "Matty!"

Matty maneuvered her horse around his, headed for the fence. "Get out of the way, Dad. I'm going to cut that wire!"

"Matty!" the old man yelped, his voice higher than usual. "Get back! I gave out orders to shoot anybody touching that wire!"

"M'Queen!" bawled Jeb Wharton, crying it out above the noise of the cattle and the roar of the flood and the buzz of the rain. He showed the .44 in his right hand aimed at M'Queen, and the wire-cutters in his left, juggling them a bit to make sure they weren't lost to view. "You've got a

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hot-tempered hellcat for a daughter. My condolences. It's an old army tactic: distraction. You didn't even see me grab out my Colt, did you? Nor your men. Now I got it out, and I got my demolition weapon too. Wire-cutters. Fence means fight, M'Queen. Where's your army?"

Wharton walked deliberately to the fence, walking on eggs, keeping his eye on the riflemen and M'Queen. M'Queen's red face puffed up like a frog's, and his eyebrows drew down over his eyes wrathfully. He jiggled up and down so much his horse stomped about under him.

"Well, you riflemen!" he yelped in his frustration, looking up and down the fence at his immobilized fence guards. "What the hell you think I pay you for—raising saddlesores?"

Nobody moved. Nobody except Wharton. With three quick twists, he severed the wires. And in another instant a pair of surprised and delighted cattle wandered out into the clear range of M'Queen's Lazy Q. Then more followed. And finally a string of longhorns came crashing through the opening.

The .44 moved back and forth over the line of riflemen at the posts. M'Queen sat slumped on his horse, like a bag of potatoes suddenly empty and flapping in the wind. Matty M'Queen sat stiffly on her horse, a dazed, chagrined look on her face. It was as if she had fought a hard battle with herself, and had lost.

M'Queen suddenly came to life. "You'll pay for this, Wharton!" he screamed. "Till hell freezes over, you'll pay!"

But that was all he got out. At that instant—from the distances of the north—there came a rumbling, earth-shaking explosion. To Wharton it seemed like the booming roar of a field artillery piece.

"Dynamite!" said Dusty, his watery eyes puzzled. Then they brightened up. "The levee at the head of M'Queen's valley! Easterly's blown it up!"

Across the fence M'Queen jerked his head up, his face gray. "I'd forgotten about the levee. Matty, my valley! They've flooded it! It's gone!"

Matty M'Queen's face was dark. She turned to Wharton, her expression eloquent in its hatred. "So that's your game, Wharton. You did mean to grab off our land all along." She stared venomously at him and then moved forward with a yell: "All you riflemen! Come on! We've got to get the cattle to high land before the water comes!"

She waved her hat in the air, and rode hell for leather down the slope, with the riflemen close behind her, yelling and waving their own hats. The Lazy Q herd stood in the valley's dead center.

Wharton waved to the bottoms ranchers. "Montague, you and your top hand round up our cows and keep them on high ground. The rest of us are going down to help M'Queen."

Wharton, Dusty, and the ranchers pounded down the slope, keeping a weather eye cocked at the head of the valley. They saw the first curling, foaming wall of water appear suddenly along the grass-covered ravine that ran through the center of M'Queen's ranch. The wave rippled along the earth, spread out rapidly, growing, slaming onward in an ever-increasing mass. Then behind the initial wave came tons more of water, pushing, pressing on, thundering down on top the original crest. The water ate into the earth, spreading everywhere, tearing up grass, stones, earth, ripping up trees, smashing brush, flinging up boulders.

EXPERTLY, the Lazy Q riders surrounded the herd, counter-clockwise, pushing the cattle gently up the grade in an immense wheel-like movement. The bottoms ranchers pounded on, backing up the push of M'Queen's riders. Pistol shots cracked, and cowhands yelled.

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Running, hollering, shooting, they edged the cattle up the slope and past the worst of the flood. Below them the water had reached M'Queen's big ranch house, embracing it in a grip of death.

A quarter of an hour later, the main part of the herd was safely on high ground, and Wharton rode back to the ridge.

M'Queen looked limp and tired. He had hardly moved since Wharton rode off. There were tears in M'Queen's eyes, but no expression. He saw the look of sympathy in Wharton's eye, and he straightened in the saddle with an effort. "I'll build again, Wharton. I'll put back the levee and build again. I'm not licked."

Wharton nodded. "You're welcome to Walking A grass, if you need it." He heard, rather than saw, Matty M'Queen ride up behind him. He turned and saw her eyes.

"I hope you're pleased with what you've done to us, Wharton," she said bitterly. "Nobody ever made a fool out of me like that before. And you won't again! I'm warning you, to my dying day, I'll do everything in my power to bring you to justice, Wharton. To my dying day."

Wharton bit his lip, and looked across at the proud, angry girl. "Miss M'Queen, to prove where I stand, I'm going after Easterly. That's all I'll say. Draw your own conclusions."

He turned his horse along the fence and loped off in the clear, cool air. It had stopped raining. . . .

To the right the bluff dropped thirty feet to the river, and to the left rose M'Queen's fence. The trail was a scant two yards wide, and when the two riders finally came face to face, neither of them could pass. Jeb Wharton topped a sharp rise, and the moment he looked over it he saw Ben Easterly riding up toward him. He held his hands in plain sight, one on the reins, the other free.

Easterly's eyes were alert. His clothes were soggy and muddy and grass-stained.

A faint steam rose from his soaked clothes. They rode toward each other slowly, each man weighing, studying the other.

"Where've you been?" Wharton asked.

"Up the river," Easterly said off-handedly. "Trying to figure out some way to stop the flood."

"Noteworthy activity," Wharton observed. "Find anything?"

A loose grin bagged out Easterly's dark mouth. "Didn't need to. Damndest thing happened. Whole blasted river changed course and came down M'Queen's valley."

Wharton eyed Easterly. "Opinion seems to favor that trick was done with dynamite, Easterly."

"Fancy that!" Easterly said. "Who'd do a crummy thing like that to a fine gent like M'Queen?"

"Opinion favors you, Easterly."

Easterly grinned. "Wish I'd of thought of it. But I didn't." His eyes brightened. "Care to make something out of it?"

Wharton smiled flatly. "I care to make something of your gunplay with Henley, Easterly. I care to bring you to justice for that."

Easterly frowned. "That's a right tough job you've picked."

"I'm the man to do it."

"Self-defense. My hands is clean."

"Are you coming without trouble, or do we have to do it the hard way?"

Easterly frowned. "For shooting Henley? Hell, Wharton, I don't think you got a case. M'Queen'll swear to it; so will Henley. But what twelve men in the Territory will say I did?"

"It isn't a case of the verdict, Easterly. Right now it's a case of custody I'm interested in."

"You got a warrant?" Easterly asked slyly.

"Sue me later. I'm taking you in without any paper to back me up. Call it a citizen's arrest."

Easterly laughed. The sound was short

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and tense. Then he sneered. "By force?"

"By force."

Easterly chewed his lip, a sneer on his wide mouth. "Take me."

WHARTON moved his horse forward, approaching Easterly's right side. He got within two feet of the horse when Easterly, his face dark and stiff, suddenly broke. His right hand plunged for the pistol in his holster.

Jeb's hand went for his, but Easterly was faster, probably from previous experience. Easterly's first shot slammed into Wharton's side, spinning him half around in the saddle. Then, carefully, with the shock of the blow spreading through his side, Wharton notched Easterly in the sights of his gun, and fired deliberately.

Easterly got in another shot, almost simultaneously, but this one missed Wharton completely. Jeb Wharton's bullet took Easterly in the stomach. Ben Easterly sagged in the saddle, his gun firing for a third time into the mud. The weapon dropped out from his hand, smacking into the earth. Slowly he toppled over on top of it, and after a moment he lay face down in the sodden grass.

Jeb Wharton stared down at the body of this embittered, conceited man. He was a man who had been too impatient to wait for things to come his way and too concerned with making a big name for himself to build up his reputation slowly the hard way.

With an effort, he composed himself, and was almost sitting easy in the saddle when the horse rode up behind him. He heard a gasp, turned and recognized Matty M'Queen. He smiled, saw her look of shock and despair, felt the terrible pain in his side, realized with disbelief that he was really hurt, and then blacked out without even leaving the saddle. . . .

It was midsummer before Wharton got on his feet again. Easterly's one bullet came out easy, but the wound healed slowly, and

Jeb caught the fever when he was lowest. Matty M'Queen nursed him back to health in a makeshift sick room in the town hotel.

Montague came every day, and so did Dusty. Together Montague and Dusty had put the Walking A back on its feet. On his first day out of bed, Jeb Wharton had just put a saddle on his horse, when Montague rode up, his hound-dog face wrinkled with smiles.

"Got a surprise for you, Wharton," he said. Together they rode out to the bottoms, and as they reached the point where the trail sloped down to the Walking A, Wharton saw it himself: the Big Sioux, the ranches below, and a long, imposing levee built along the river to a height of six feet.

"We all done it, Wharton," Montague said. "A joint effort by the bottoms ranchers. Ain't she a beaut?"

Jeb Wharton grinned and said it was. They rode down to the river, and Wharton looked over the barricade of sandbags and rock.

"M'Queen paid for it," Montague announced unexpectedly. "Now ain't that something?"

Wharton grinned. It certainly was something.

"I've got to be getting back to my spread, Wharton," Montague said abruptly, obviously ill at ease. "So long, boy." He spurred off along the river to his own place.

Wharton looked after him in hurt surprise. "Now what got into his craw?" he asked out loud.

"A right proper modesty," said a soft voice behind him. Jeb Wharton turned his head. "Matty," he laughed. "Don't Indian up on me like that. I might open up that wound turning around trying to get a good look at you."

"Then I would have to take you in for good, wouldn't I?" she asked with a wide grin.

"Matty," he said, "if you don't, I'll never forgive you." ★ ★ ★

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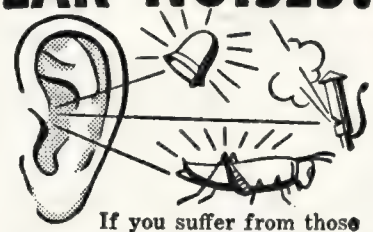

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(Continued from page 8)

withdrawal of French soldiers, the liberal Juarez seized the opportunity to stage another uprising.

In vain, Max and Carlotta wrote Louis Napoleon urgent letters reminding him of his promise to leave troops in Mexico to support them. At last, seeing that something must be done, Carlotta told Max she would go to Europe and appeal to Napoleon personally, in an effort to make him understand their desperate situation.

After parting from her husband, Carlotta journeyed back across the ocean to Paris to see Napoleon. But the French ruler told her bluntly that he would take no further interest in Mexican affairs, and not even her most emotional appeals could sway him.

For many weary months, then, Carlotta traveled through Europe seeking desperately to enlist military aid for Max. But everywhere, she met failure. The severe strain, the constant worry over the fate of Max back in Mexico, finally was too much for her. Carlotta of the vibrant beauty, the rich red hair and the flashing green eyes, grew thin and pale; at last she collapsed completely, and was taken to her old home in Belgium.

Meantime, Max found himself besieged by increasing numbers of Juarez adherents. He mustered his own forces and fought well and valiantly but one of his generals proved treacherous and delivered him into the hands of the enemy. Along with several of his chief aides, Max was sentenced to death. He died with the gallant dignity befitting a high-born ruler. . . .

Carlotta lived out the rest of her years in Belgium, a fragile phantom of the lovely, vivacious girl Max had known. She never again took her place in the courts of Europe; but to the end of her life she was addressed as the Empress of Mexico, and in her memories the man she loved was always a great and powerful Emperor. ★ ★ ★

LADY HELLCATS ON THE LOOSE

(Continued from page 62)

away, give him some grub and water and leave him here. He can figure the rest out for himself."

The ladies agreed. Then they piled, once again, into the coach, and Slim got up on the box. The stage breezed on down the road, leaving the Badman of the Dakotas stranded, pantless, shoeless and angrily weeping.

He reached Lead late that night and gave himself up.

As far as the five Bostonians were concerned, they were so close to the actual end of their journey that they merely stopped long enough for supper, before heading on toward Deadwood. Lead never realized how lucky it had been.

On the trip between Lead and Deadwood, the girls had a chance to mend their ladylike dresses and trappings. By the time the stage rolled into Deadwood the five passengers, once again, looked much like a bevy of fair young visitors from the civilized East.

Calamity's four charges were on their best behavior as Calamity introduced them to their new boss, Swarringer. Their looks were so authentic that Swarringer, although Calamity had told him the truth about the girl's various lurid backgrounds, promptly renamed his combination saloon-and-dance hall, "The Boston Ladies."

Calamity, true to her military training, had accomplished her mission. She lost no time in hunting up Wild Bill Hickok to tell him the good news.

"Was it much of a trip back here with them hellions?" asked Bill.

"Oh, no," said Calamity Jane. "You see, you were right. When a lady dresses like a lady, there is never any trouble."

As for the four hellcats—they behaved like finishing school products for a few days; then they cut loose in earnest. But, in Deadwood, it didn't matter very much. Deadwood could take it. ★ ★ ★

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(Continued from page 6)

Dreaming of Consuela's delight when he brought the lovely little charm to her, and of how he would keep her to her promise to wed its finder, Miguel was not as careful as usual in guiding his horse along the rough, pitted terrain. The animal stumbled, lost its footing, and went crashing down a hillside. Miguel, seeing his mount was hopelessly injured, ended its misery with a shot; but he himself was left with a broken leg and other hurts.

For several hours, in a biting wind and snowstorm. Miguel called out for help, wondering if he should die of exposure or his wounds before someone found him in these remote hills.

But after awhile, help did reach the stricken man; and his rescuer was none other than his rival for Consuela's affections—the debonair Ramon! For Ramon, somewhat belatedly, had learned of the old Indian woman who had owned the charm and was on his way to her cabin. Hearing Miguel's cries for help, however, he promptly rendered the necessary aid.

When he found that Miguel had already bought the golden charm, Ramon grinned with good sportsmanship—though his eyes revealed his disappointment—and remarked: "Ah, Miguel, you're a lucky fellow in spite of the fall and the broken leg, for you shall soon have the beautiful Consuela for your own!"

But after he had been taken to a doctor, and his hurts had been tended, the grateful Miguel offered to give up the golden antlers.

"You saved my life, and I can no longer compete with you for Consuela's favor," he declared to Ramon. "Here, take the charm to her yourself."

"No," replied Ramon, "I cannot do that. But when you are well, we shall take the charm back to the old woman. And we shall tell Consuela that she must choose between us on our own merits."

ACES AND QUEENS

So that is what they did . . . and when Consuela heard their story, she knew that it was Ramon she truly loved. For Ramon's rescue of his rival when he could have left Miguel to die, and his refusal to accept the charm, showed her a new side of the light-hearted young man's character. She knew then that Ramon was fine and honorable as well as gay and charming—something she had never known before.

Ramon and Consuela were soon married. And as her first gift, Consuela made her husband a shirt of fine cloth, and embroidered on the breast pocket, were tiny golden antlers. . . .

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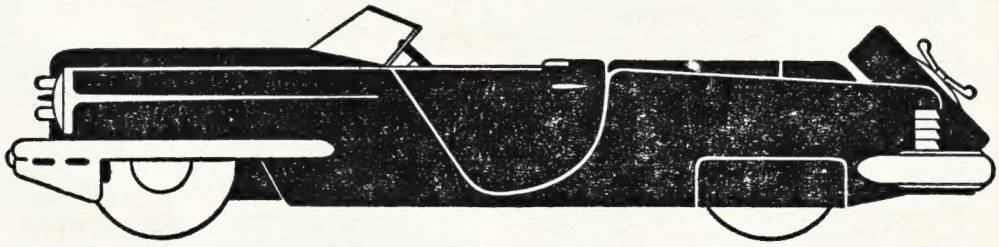

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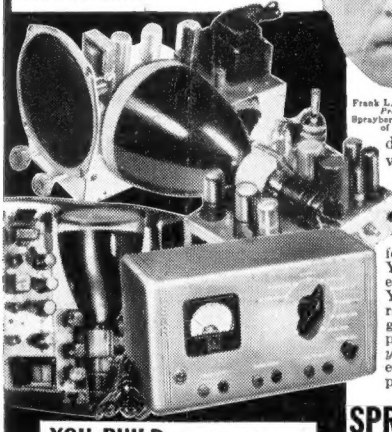

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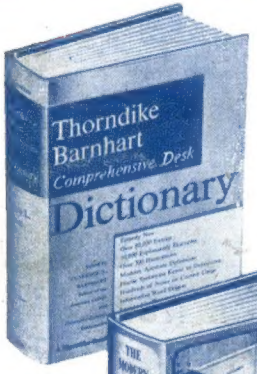

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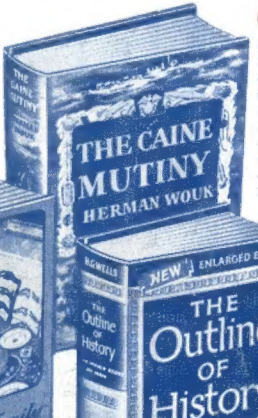

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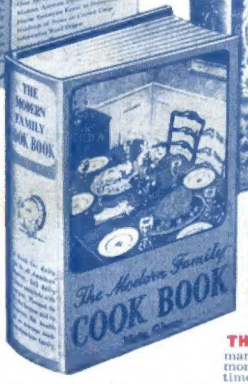

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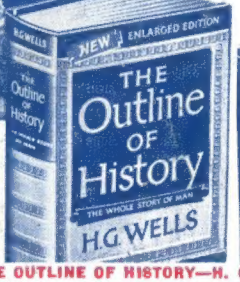

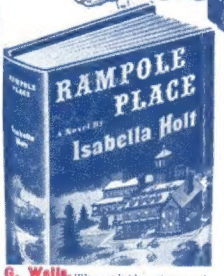

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